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THE FORTUNES OF THE ASHTONS

VOLUME XVI

The Works of
George W. M. Reynolds

The
Fortunes of the Ashtons

Volume I

The Mysteries of the Court of London

Privately Printed
For Members of
The Oxford Society
London Boston

"SUCH WAS THE INDIVIDUAL WHO JOINED THE LADY"
Photogravure from original by Merrill

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George W. M. Reynolds

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De Luxe Edition

Of this edition, printed for members of The Oxford Society, but One Thousand copies have been issued, of which this is copy

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REYNOLDS' WORKS

CHAPTER I

THE BROTHERS

It was in the middle of the year 1824, that two brothers were entered as graduates at one of the colleges of Oxford University. Their name was Vivian; they belonged to the noble family of Viviandale, but as their father was a junior scion thereof, his pecuniary means were rather limited. The Honourable Mr. Vivian, who was a widower, had but these two sons, and he hoped by giving them a collegiate education, to fit them for such professions as they might respectively be led by taste or opportunity to adopt, and in which the family interest was likely to push them on. They were two handsome youths, — reflecting in their own persons the masculine beauty of a fine and haughty race, — with dispositions naturally good, but nevertheless already somewhat warped by a fond father's too great indulgence, as well as by the influences of that sphere of life in which they were born, and in the midst of which they had been caressed, petted, and flattered.

At the time when they entered Oxford University, Hugh, the elder, was in the opening of his twenty-first year, Bertram, the younger, a little past eighteen. They were of equal stature, but Hugh was more strongly and stoutly built than his brother, not merely because his additional two years had given to his form more manly developments, but because the younger was naturally of a more slender and more gracefully symmetrical figure. Though it was impossible not to be struck by the haughtily handsome countenance of the elder, it was equally impossible to avoid drawing a comparison in favour of the more delicately chiseled Grecian profile of the latter. The expression of Hugh's features was entirely of the sense; that of Bertram's of the sentiment. While the former indicated a love of pleasure, strong passions, and a disposition which was sensuous as well as proud, that of the latter denoted a rare intelligence blended with its pride, and the classic curl of the short upper lip declared an instinctive disdain of falsehood. Hugh's forehead was large, prominent, and massive, that of Bertram high and arched; the former pale from a too early acquaintance with dissipation, the latter pale likewise, but as if genius itself had stamped that pallor there. Thus the brow of the elder brother seemed one on which passion and pleasure might in after years trace their lines; while that of the younger brother had all the immortality of the intellect predicted in its marble dream. The eyes of both were dark, — those of the elder flashing with all worldly feelings, those of the younger with the lightnings of the mind. Hugh's hair was black, strong even to coarseness, and without a gloss; that of Bertram was of raven richness, shining with its own natural velvety brightness, and clustering in excessive luxuriance over the small, delicate, well-folded ears, and by the sides of the alabaster temples. Altogether, the elder brother was one whose fine appearance could not fail to command admiration, but nothing else; while that of the younger brother inspired the same feeling, but blended with interest, and almost love.

On entering upon their college life, Hugh soon formed acquaintances of dispositions congenial with his own, and gave himself up to manly sports by day and dissipated pleasures by night. Hunting, racing, boating, fishing, and cock-fighting constituted the former; revelling, cards, and visits to forbidden haunts of pleasurable vice composed the latter. On the other hand, Bertram — led by taste as well as by a sense of duty — applied himself to his studies, but he could not altogether escape the influences of an elder brother's example. In aristocratic families, where the casualties of nature may raise elder brothers to the possession of hereditary titles and estates, younger brothers are apt to look up to them with perhaps too much deference, from a sense that they may in process of time be placed in the position of destiny's arbiters in respect to the worldly career of those whom the laws of primogeniture and entail thus throw in dependence upon them. Moreover, there is often, even in the breasts of the best-disposed youths, a spirited and prideful disinclination to be taunted with being "bookworms" and "saints," when elder brothers invite them to partake in pleasures and amusements; and thus is it that well-principled lads are frequently led, by a sense of false shame, to quit pursuits in reality most congenial to their tastes, and deviate into others but little consonant with their inclinations. To all these varied but potent influences was Bertram Vivian subjected, and when once the ice was broken, — when once, in other words, he had left his studies to accompany his brother and that brother's boon companions amidst scenes of pleasure, — the compunctious feelings attendant thereon gradually wore off. Not, however, that Bertram became inveterately dissipated, or that he abandoned himself so completely to pleasure, as did Hugh, but still he was not so steady as he ought to have been. The consequences were, that at the end of the first year of the two young men's collegiate experience, they found that they had far outstripped their pecuniary means, and that they had contracted debts which they dared not mention to their father, and which nevertheless without his succour they had not the remotest chance of liquidating.

The university tradesmen were not however clamorous. It was sufficient for them to know that the Vivians belonged to a family in which there were lofty titles that bespoke the accompaniment of great wealth, and they considered themselves tolerably safe in being sooner or later paid by some member of this aristocratic family. Hugh pursued his career of extravagance as if he were actual heir to the Marquisate of Viviandale from which the family lustre was derived, between which and himself there were nevertheless great gulfs fixed; while Bertram, though without the moral courage to stop short in the pathway of ruin, was at times distracted by the sense of those difficulties that were gradually enmeshing him in a web which he feared to be inextricable. He had not, we say, the moral courage to check himself: that feeling of false shame, and that idea of more or less dependence on his brother, to which we have already alluded, prevented him from asserting the natural rectitude of his position and courageously obeying its impulses in spite of all other considerations. But fortunately for him, something occurred which turned all his thoughts and all his feelings into a completely new channel.

The brothers had been about a year at the university — they were now respectively somewhat past twenty-one and nineteen — when Bertram accidentally formed the acquaintance of a half-pay captain in the army and his daughter. The gentleman, whose name was Lacey, was stricken in years; he had married late in life, — one child was the issue of this alliance, — but the event which rendered him a father made him also a widower. His means were limited, but he had done his best to rear his darling Eliza in a becoming manner. He had stinted himself to give her a good education, and as she grew up in loveliness and in virtue, she rewarded him for his care with the most devoted affection. Sensible of the numerous sacrifices which her father had made on her account, she felt that no degree of tenderness could be too great wherewith to recompense such a parent. His will, therefore, was her law, and if he had demanded any sacrifice at her hands, even that of her life, she would have made it resignedly, nay, more, cheerfully.

And exquisitely beautiful was Eliza Lacey. A year younger than Bertram Vivian, that is to say, with eighteen summers upon her head at the time their acquaintance was formed, youth and health lent all their charms to her face and figure. A cloud of raven tresses fell around her oval countenance; her complexion was matchless in its transparent purity, pale on the lofty, expansive brow, dazzlingly fair on the softly rounded shoulders, the arching neck, and the Hebe-modelled bust, but with the rich carnation tint upon the cheeks, and with a still more vivid and a riper crimson on the lips. The delicately pencilled raven brows arched nobly above eyes that were large and dark, and which though so bright had an ineffable sweetness of expression. Her features were outlined with a perfect regularity, and her teeth were as white as pearls. A little above the medium stature of woman, her figure, just in all its proportions, had a certain graceful and flowing roundness in the contours and in the limbs, which added to its marvellous symmetry. All her movements, even to the slightest gesture, were characterized by an unstudied elegance, and thus, in every respect, was she the rarest model of feminine beauty. Her disposition was amiable and good, naturally trustful and confiding; incapable of guile herself, she suspected it not in others. Scandal and malice, jealousy and envy, were known to her only by name, beyond which she had no experience of them. Her manners and her conversation were modelled by her character, — frank, artless, and fascinating. Yet though so utterly unacquainted with the darker sides of humanity and the treacheries of the world, she was not on this account to be regarded as an easy victim for seductive perfidy; her very innocence was in itself a defence. The intuitive sense of her sex's dignity and of virginal propriety would in a moment have led her to resent the slightest word that shocked, or the first look that threatened her with insult.

Such was Eliza Lacey. She dwelt with her father in a small but comfortable house on the outskirt of the University City, their only attendant being an elderly female who was in Captain Lacey's service at the time of his marriage, and who had therefore known his charming and interesting daughter from the moment of her birth. Captain Lacey, on leaving the army and settling down into married life, had fixed his abode at Oxford, not exactly through choice, but from the fact that the death of a relative had bequeathed him a small property consisting of three houses. In one of these he lived; the other two were let, and the moderate rentals derived therefrom, added to his own half-pay, constituted his entire income. This was small enough, but still, by dint of the strictest frugality, the little family was enabled to maintain a respectable appearance and avoid debt. The possession of the houses likewise relieved Captain Lacey's mind from the bitter anxiety which he would otherwise have felt at the thought of death snatching him away from the world ere his daughter should be comfortably settled in it, for though his half-pay would die with him, yet the rents of the little property would produce a sufficiency for the subsistence of her who would be left behind him. Thus, though well aware that the city of Oxford was by no means the most suitable place for a beautiful girl, as Eliza was, to reside in, Captain Lacey was in a certain measure chained to the spot; and, moreover, he trusted to his daughter's admirable principles as a sufficient safeguard against whatsoever temptation might be thrown in her way. He had, however, been careful in avoiding the acquaintance of any of the young collegians, and though several attempts were made on their part to obtain an introduction to Captain Lacey and his daughter, they had all proved ineffectual.

It is needless to particularize the details of the accident which threw Bertram Vivian in their way. Suffice it to say that on one occasion he was fortunate enough in being close at hand when a half-tipsy undergraduate, meeting the young lady in the street, offered her an insult, and he struck the fellow to the ground. To escort Miss Lacey to her home became a courteous necessity on his part, and which she could not without rudeness decline; to be invited to walk in and receive the thanks of her father was an equally natural sequence. During this brief interview, Captain Lacey was so favourably impressed with his daughter's deliverer that when the latter solicited permission to call and pay his respects again, utter churlishness could have alone refused it. He did call, and he became enamoured of Eliza Lacey. The tone of his conversation, his agreeable manners, the delicacy of his conduct, and the unstudied evidences of a fine intellect which developed themselves, all contributed to confirm Captain Lacey's favourable opinion on the one hand, and to make their impression upon Eliza's heart on the other. The captain, without setting himself studiously and deliberately to work to inquire into the young man's prospects, thought it, when he happened to learn that Bertram belonged to a noble family, quite sufficient to prove that these prospects must be good; and though hitherto he had entertained a very indifferent opinion — bordering indeed almost upon aversion — for the Oxford collegians, he was now inclined to fancy that Bertram Vivian constituted at least one very favourable exception.

Bertram called as often as he dared, consistently with delicacy, when this acquaintance first commenced; his visits, however, soon became more frequent, and from the very fact that he found pleasure in taking a quiet cup of tea and passing his evenings in that humble parlour, the captain argued everything in favour of the young man's steadiness. Thus was it that as weeks grew into months, and Bertram's attentions became more and more marked toward Eliza, the father inwardly rejoiced on beholding the evidences of a mutual attachment on the part of the young couple, for he felt that his gray hairs would go down with additional resignation, and even with contentment, to the grave, if previous to his death he had the happiness of seeing his beloved daughter comfortably settled in life. If the captain had been wise — or, in other words, more cunningly and shrewdly worldly-minded — he would have taken the trouble to inquire into the young man's prospects, when he would have found that though belonging to the Viviandale family, yet as the younger son of a younger branch, Bertram had nothing but that family's interest to push him on in the world. The retired old officer was, however, naturally indolent, too apt to take his own views of things as positively acquired facts, and withal exceedingly self-willed, so that whatever he got into his head, he regarded as something quite as positive, real, and actual, as if it had received ten thousand unmistakable corroborations.

Months passed on, and Bertram Vivian became steadiness itself. Scrupulously keeping secret his acquaintance with the Lacey family, he withdrew himself from the society of Hugh and his companions, love rendering him utterly indifferent to the taunts which a false shame would not at one time have suffered him to endure. His brother fancied that he was seized with a studying fit, and being at length tired of endeavouring to draw the "bookworm," as he called him, from his pursuits, he vented his annoyance in such terms as "milksop" and "saint," and ultimately left Bertram altogether to his own courses. Thus, all the time that the younger brother could spare from his studies — and some too which he pilfered therefrom — he passed at Captain Lacey's house.

It was a dream of bliss in which the two lovers were plunged. Months and months had elapsed since their acquaintance first commenced, and though their lips had breathed no avowal of affection, yet their looks had mutually told the tale. They never walked out together, because Bertram did not choose to stand the chance of encountering, when in the companionship of Eliza, any of his college friends, — least of all his brother. He was fearful of being dragged into the necessity of introducing them, and from such an idea he recoiled loathingly. It was sufficient happiness for him to sit by the charming girl's side in the comfortable little parlour, conversing with her, reading to her, looking over books with her, gazing upon her while she worked, and exchanging tender glances. Even the presence of her father was not felt as a restraint, for the old gentleman, when not dozing in his armchair, treated him with as much kindness as if he were a son, considered him as good as formally engaged to his daughter, and smiled upon them both. But if the father took no pains to make direct inquiries into the young man's prospects, the artless and unsophisticated Eliza, it may be easily supposed, made none at all. She just knew that he was connected with the Viviandale family, and no more. As for there being anything selfish in her love, the Alpine snows were not purer. It was a youthful heart's first virgin affection that was given to Bertram Vivian; on his side it was a young man's first love, profound, glowing, impassioned, but all a dream, without the soberness of waking reflections. He paused not to ask himself whether this vision of bliss could ever be realized, whether it were possible that he should ever lead Eliza Lacey to the altar. The present was so full of rapturous enjoyment that he looked not beyond it. Youthful love is in itself faith and hope; it is the religion of the heart, as the worship of God is the religion of the soul. It has a sort of tacit reliance upon the future, without studying the grounds on which such reliance is based; it believes in paradise, as the worshipper of the Almighty believes in paradise also, without knowing when or how the period of enjoyment is to be brought about.

Thus a year passed away from the date of Bertram's acquaintance with the Laceys, when, in the middle of 1826, he was suddenly startled from his dream of bliss. A death in the family, by removing the old marquis, called another to assume the coronet, and the two young men were summoned peremptorily from Oxford to attend the funeral of the deceased peer. The same letter gave them to understand that the circumstance of their heavy debts had come to their father's knowledge, that they must be careful to bring with them lists of their liabilities, with a view to their prompt and equitable settlement, and that they were to give notice to their tutors that they would return to Oxford no more. If it were a merely temporary separation from Eliza, Bertram could have borne it, as indeed he had borne, during the vacation, a brief interruption to their constant companionship. But now that he was given to understand that his father's circumstances, being somewhat improved by the death in the family, enabled him at once to provide for his two sons, and that therefore their collegiate career was at an end, the young man's grief knew no bounds.

In a state bordering upon frenzy, he flew to Captain Lacey's house, and sought an interview with Eliza. Her father was out for his usual walk at the time, and some household duties had kept the young maiden at home. The unexpected visit from her lover at an unusual hour would have been fraught with ineffable pleasure, were it not for the distressing intelligence he had to communicate. They threw themselves into each other's arms, they embraced tenderly; it was the first time that ever their lips had met in kisses, — the first time that ever Eliza's heart beat against Bertram's own. They were both now awakened, as if by a thunderclap, from their dream of bliss, and for the first half-hour of this parting interview, their affliction bordered upon despair. But did we not ere now say that love itself is faith and hope? and it is not in the nature of youthful souls to abandon themselves altogether to utter desperation. Neither was it in this case. By degrees they grew calmer, and Bertram whispered vows and protestations and hopes in the ear of his beloved.

" My father," he said, " purposes at once to embark me in some career in which I may doubtless acquire fortune and eminence. The family to which I belong is rich and powerful, and with all the advantages of such interest, my struggle against the world can neither be a painful nor a long one. Besides, sweetest, dearest girl, your image will serve as my guiding-star, the beacon of hope, the emblem of that reward which shall crown all my arduous toils. A few years — perhaps only two or three may be necessary — will soon pass; we are both so young, dearest Eliza. We shall then be young still, and when we meet again to part no more, oh, what happiness will await us! And then, too, whatever may be the career for which my father destines me, I may from time to time be enabled to hasten thither, on the wings of love, to see you. We can write to each other, and in all these prospects, in all these circumstances, there are many sources of consolation."

The head of the weeping girl — that beauteous head, drooping like a tulip on its slender stalk — sank on her lover's shoulder, and she murmured expressions of unchanging love, as well as of gratitude for the solace he proffered her.

"You are mine, adored Eliza," he said. "You are mine, and here, in the face of Heaven, do I pledge myself wholly and solely unto you. Take this ring, my well-beloved; it has the initial of my Christian name graven on the stone. Keep it, Eliza, as an earnest of those vows which I so solemnly, sacredly plight you now."

Almost blinded by her tears, the lovely being placed the ring in her bosom, and drawing off one from her own fair finger, she murmured, in accents that were broken and scarcely audible, yet filled with the soft, plaintive harmony of her dulcet voice, "And you, dearest Bertram, take this. It bears also the initial of my name. I will not tell you that I shall remain constant. My own heart gives me that assurance, and you, who can read the secrets of that heart, know that it is entirely and inseparably thine."

Bertram took the ring, pressed it to his lips, and placed it upon his finger. Then the moment for parting came. Oh, who can depict the anguish, the excruciation of feeling, which marked that moment? The calmness which had succeeded the first ebullition of despair, and which in itself was only comparative, vanished altogether. Bertram strained his adored Eliza in convulsive violence to his breast; they both felt as if the tenderest cords of their hearts were being rudely torn asunder. They separated in a state bordering upon frenzy. Bertram rushed from the house, while the young maiden, sinking upon a seat, felt as if she and happiness had shaken hands for ever.

Captain Lacy returned home about a quarter of an hour afterward, and when the agonizing intentness of Eliza's affliction had somewhat passed away, or at least was mitigated by the hopes which she busied herself to conjure up. For, oh, it was so necessary for that young heart to sustain itself with hope! The captain was thunderstruck when his daughter informed him of what had occurred. He — good, credulous, but self-willed man — had arranged everything so comfortably in his own mind. Bertram would no doubt stay another year longer at the university, he would then be well provided for by his family, and his marriage with

Eliza would at once take place as a matter of course. Such was the captain's foreshadowing, but the dream was suddenly dispelled, and with the destruction of his delusions came worldly-minded reflections, thickly pouring in. His eyes were now opened to the fatal error he had committed; he ought to have inquired at the outset whether in due time Bertram Vivian would be in a position to settle in marriage. He now comprehended that so far from anything of the sort, the young man had to enter on the career of life, and, with certain chances given him, carve them out into substantial shape as best he could.

The captain was by no means such an idiot as not to bethink himself that separation and altered circumstances make a wonderful change in the youthful heart; and firmly convinced as he had previously been that all would go on smoothly in love's career, to be crowned with the marriage of the young couple in the end, so settled did his conviction now become that the whole thing was as good as broken off between them. He inwardly cursed himself for his folly, but out of regard for his daughter, he did not at once suffer her to perceive how altered his views were in respect to the hope that he should ever see her the bride of Bertram Vivian.

A few days elapsed, at the expiration of which interval Eliza received a letter, dated from Oaklands, the seat of the head of the family to which her lover belonged, and which was situated in Hampshire, far away from the city of Oxford. There it was that the old marquis had died, and his successor had taken possession of the hereditary honours and estates; there it was, too, that all the members of the family were now assembled, to attend the grand funeral which was to consign the deceased peer to his last resting-place. The letter was such a passion-breathing epistle as an enthusiastic lover might be expected to write, and as an adoring maiden might expect to receive. It told her that Bertram's father, now Lord Vivian, had not as yet spoken to either of his sons in respect to his intentions concerning them, but that such communication was reserved until after the funeral, when Bertram would write again to his beloved.

And in a few more days another letter came. But if it were written almost in despair, so it likewise nearly filled with despair the heart of the affectionate maiden. Bertram was at once going abroad as a paid attaché to the English embassy in the United States, and seas would therefore soon roll between himself and his beloved. So hurried were the preliminaries for his departure, and so closely was he watched by his sire, that he had no opportunity of obeying the dictates of his heart, and flying to Oxford to bid Eliza a last farewell. But he renewed all his pledges of devoted affection, reminded her of the exchange of rings, and conjured her to sustain her spirits for his sake.

Captain Lacey, to whom these letters were shown by his daughter, — who never in her life kept anything secret from her father, — was more than ever convinced of the infatuated madness of his own conduct in suffering the young couple to linger on in their dream of bliss while himself hoped that it would be ultimately realized. He saw that his daughter's happiness was altogether at stake, and painful though it were for him to take such a step, it was nevertheless his duty to make her aware of his sentiments. Better for her now to envisage at once the uncertainty of her heart's hope ever being fulfilled, than for her to continue cherishing that hope with the prospect of having it blighted in the end. He therefore gently and gradually, and with ill-subdued emotions, represented to her that Bertram Vivian had evidently to commence the upward toil of life, that years might elapse ere he would be sufficiently independent to come and claim an almost portionless young lady as his bride, that in the meanwhile the ardour of his passion might cool, new faces might inspire new sentiments, and even if another affection might not beguile him from his first love, prudential reasons might induce him to form some brilliant matrimonial alliance. Eliza listened with mingled grief and astonishment to her father's observations, and enthusiastically did she express her conviction — uttered, however, amidst torrents of tears — that Bertram would remain faithful. Captain Lacey had nerved his fortitude to the accomplishment of a certain duty, and he was resolved not to do it by halves. He therefore went on to say that Eliza, if she were prudent, would do well to prepare herself for any eventual disappointment, and that painful though it were for him to issue a harsh injunction, he felt the absolute necessity of forbidding all correspondence between herself and Bertram, adding that he himself would write the young gentleman a letter to explain his views on the subject.

He did write such a letter. It was kindly and considerately worded, recommending Mr. Bertram Vivian to abstain, for at least a couple of years, from any correspondence with his daughter, suggesting that this interval would fully test the state of his feelings with regard to her, and promising that if at the end of the period he should still experience the same attachment, he (Captain Lacey) would be only too delighted and proud to permit Eliza to renew her engagement with the Honourable Mr. Bertram Vivian.

The young lady's good sense showed her that her father was acting with a due regard to her welfare, and, moreover, it was her habit to submit implicitly to his will. She had the fullest confidence in Bertram; she had equal confidence in the strength of her own love. Two years, oh, what was this interval as a test for that love which she felt assured would outlive centuries, if human existence itself ranged over ages! The very necessity of clinging to hope made her picture to herself this interval as soon passing away, and then there need be no further barrier to her happiness. The engagement would be renewed, or, rather, reacknowledged by her parent, and if years should still elapse ere she became Bertram's bride, she could wait, happy and contented in the consciousness of possessing his love.

The letter was despatched at once to Bertram Vivian. It reached him on the eve of his departure for the United States, and his reply came by return of post. He bowed to Captain Lacey's decision, not but that it pained him sorely, yet he bowed, so that this very submission might be taken as a proof of his love, shown to the daughter through the deferential respect paid to the father. But he besought Captain Lacey to assure Eliza of his undying constancy, of his imperishable devotion.

CHAPTER II

THE DUKE OF MARCHMONT

A YEAR had passed away, — it was now the summer of 1827, — when the English newspapers gave some meagre and scantily outlined account of a deplorable catastrophe which had taken place on an American river. A pleasure-vessel, having a numerous party on board, amongst whom were several gentlemen attached to the English embassy in the United States, had been upset in a sudden squall, and every soul had perished. The paragraph gave the names of some of the principal personages who had thus met their death, and amongst those names was that of Bertram Vivian.

Captain Lacey was reading an Oxford paper one morning after breakfast when this paragraph met his eyes, and the sudden ejaculation which burst from his lips caused Eliza to question him with trembling anxiety as to the source of his emotions. He dared not conceal the fact from her, but ere he showed her the paragraph itself, he gradually broke the fatal truth. Even before he had finished, poor Eliza comprehended it all. Not a tear escaped her eyes, no word fell from her lips, but pale as marble, she sat the image of dull, deep, blank despair. Her father caught her in his arms; then the flood-gates of her ineffable affliction were opened, and she wept long, bitterly, agonizingly. Oh, for the hopes which that heart had cherished, to be thus blighted all in a moment! Oh, for the fabric of expectant bliss which her faithful and trusting soul had built up, to be thus shattered in an instant! It was too cruel. Captain Lacey, with the tears running down his wrinkled cheeks, besought her to calm her sorrow for his sake, but the entreaty was a long time vain.

Hours passed ere Eliza could even bring herself to think deliberately upon this fearful loss; days passed ere she could awaken herself to a sense of the necessity of a pious and holy resignation to the will of Heaven. And during these days, it appeared to her as if it were all a dream, and that her brain was only morbidly reeling beneath the weight of some imagined calamity. In the night she would start up from a feverish and troubled sleep, — wakened as if by the anguished voice of a drowning one thrilling on her ears, and pressing her hands violently to her throbbing temples, she would ask herself if it could possibly be true. At length this dreamlike state of being passed away, and left her to the astounding sense of the awful reality. She prayed to Heaven for strength to bear up against it, but there were times when she felt as if she were going mad. Then, passionately, oh, how passionately, would she press Bertram's ring to her lips, and in this memento of his love in other and happier days was her only consolation. Alas, how poor a one! and yet it was a solace, though feeble as the last thread which retains the invalid to existence in the depth of a malady when the crisis for best or worst is come.

Misfortunes never arrive alone. But a few weeks after the receipt of the intelligence from the United States, a fire broke out in Captain Lacey's house, and so rapid was the spread of the devastating element that all three dwellings were reduced in a few brief hours to blackened ruins. Scarcely an article of furniture was saved: the inmates considered themselves fortunate in escaping with life alone. But this was not the full extent of the terrible calamity. Fire insurance was not so generally practised in 1827 as it is nowadays, and unfortunately Captain Lacey's property was not insured. The principal source of his income was thus cut off irretrievably, irreparably, and he found himself in his old age, with ill-health and infirmities growing rapidly upon him, reduced to his half-pay, — a mere scanty pittance. And this too would die with him. What was to become of his daughter at his death, oh, what? There was yet another misfortune in store for the poor captain and Eliza, for their faithful domestic, who had been with them so many years, was thrown upon a sick-bed through the shock occasioned by the fire, and in a few days she breathed her last.

There was a widow lady in London named Mrs. Bailey, who was very distantly related to Captain Lacey, and with whom he had corresponded at distant intervals. She was rich, occupied a splendid mansion at the West End of the metropolis, frequented the best society, and gave grand parties. A thorough woman of the world, she had all the callousness, amounting almost to heartlessness, usually characteristic of one who makes fashionable appearances her whole and sole study. The only notice she had condescended to take of her humble and poor relations at Oxford was the sending them a basket of game and a turkey at Christmas, accompanied by a brief note conveying the compliments of the season; and the acknowledgment of the gift, together with an expression of similar compliments, formed the extent of the captain's periodical correspondence with Mrs. Bailey. But now that the poor captain had such anxious cares relative to his daughter, he wrote a long letter to Mrs. Bailey, detailing the serious alteration of his circumstances in consequence of the fire. In this letter he spoke with a father's pride of the exquisite beauty of Eliza, the amiability of her disposition, and her dutiful conduct as a daughter, adding that his means had enabled him, though by dint of great sacrifices, to give her an education not altogether apart from certain elegant accomplishments. Now, this letter arrived at a time when Mrs. Bailey felt the want of some new attraction to give zest to her entertainments, which the fashionable world began to consider rather "slow affairs," the same faces being constantly met in Mrs. Bailey's drawing-rooms. The idea struck her that her requirement might be fulfilled in the person of Miss Lacey, if she were even only half as beautiful as the paternal pride had depicted her. She accordingly lost no time in writing back to Oxford, assuring Captain Lacey, with much seeming kindness in the wording of her letter, that she sympathized deeply with him in his misfortunes, and inviting himself and Eliza to come and pass a few months with her in Grosvenor Square. She enclosed a bank-note for twenty pounds, begging that the remittance might not be taken as an offence, but merely as a subsidy to defray the travelling expenses of those who were about to confer an obligation on herself by giving her their companionship.

Captain Lacey was overjoyed at this really unexpected goodness, as he considered it, on the part of his relative. Eliza would fain have lingered a few weeks longer at Oxford, to compose her mind somewhat after so many recent and frightful calamities, but she saw that her father was now all anxiety to get to London, and with her wonted amiable submissiveness, she stifled the half-prayer, half-remonstrance which had risen to her lips. The preparations they had to make were few, and they quitted the humble lodging to which they had retired after the conflagration had deprived them of their home. During the journey, Captain Lacey implored and enjoined his daughter to render herself as agreeable as possible to Mrs. Bailey, by which, in plain terms, he meant that Eliza was to shake off her low spirits and her looks of sadness by all means in her power. Misfortunes as well as anxieties on his daughter's account had rendered Captain Lacey worldly-minded and selfish. He hoped that in Mrs. Bailey's gay saloons Eliza would captivate some wealthy personage, and ever ready to jump at conclusions, the captain regarded it as almost as good as settled that Eliza should form a brilliant alliance. He did not, however, impart his views to his daughter, and the poor maiden little suspected that he was dreaming of fresh matrimonial projects on her behalf, within only a few weeks after the receipt of the frightful intelligence which had given a death-blow to the former ones. Though inwardly full of sadness, though feeling that the first affections of her heart being so cruelly blighted, she never again could love, indeed, though considering it to be a sacred duty to cling to the image of her lost Bertram, Eliza assumed as much external calmness as she could possibly call to her aid; while the natural vigour of her constitution had prevented the bitterness of affliction from making any ravages upon her beauty, beyond chasing away the colour from her cheeks. Therefore when she arrived in London, and was introduced to her relative Mrs. Bailey, she appeared to be of a loveliness so exquisite and so interesting, with the expression of pensiveness upon her countenance, that the old lady, in the enthusiasm of joy, gave both herself and her father a welcome that seemed disinterestedly cordial.

It was the month of September when the Laceys arrived in London, and the greater portion of the fashionable world being out of town, it was not the season for Mrs. Bailey's parties. She herself seldom went out of town; she disliked the country, hated the seaside, and would not for worlds give up the amusements of shopping in Regent and Bond Streets. It was therefore fortunate for Eliza's state of mind that she was not at once called upon to appear in the midst of crowded assemblies; and during the three months which now passed after her arrival in London, her grief for her lover's loss settled itself into such a holy resignation that she was no longer agitated with paroxysms of wild grief and convulsive weepings. But the expression of her eyes grew softer; a melancholy pensiveness settled upon her features, relieved, however, by that half-sad, half-sweet smile which resignation gives to the human countenance, and which is so touchingly interesting when on the beautiful face of woman.

The year 1827 was drawing toward its close, when the gaieties of the metropolis commenced. At first there were only small parties at Mrs. Bailey's house, but these grew larger and larger in proportion as the members of the fashionable world flocked back to their town mansions. Thus Eliza was not precipitated all in a moment into the midst of brilliant assemblies; she was led on by degrees to become accustomed to the bustle, animation, and gaiety of West End society, and though she would infinitely rather have remained in the solitude of her own chamber, to reflect on the image of the lost one, yet she yielded to the entreaties of her father that she would make herself agreeable to Mrs. Bailey in all things; and it was precisely to shine as a star that Mrs. Bailey had invited her to London.

Eliza Lacey soon decame the object of universal admiration. Her beauty was considered to be naturally of a pensive and touchingly interesting cast; no one except her father knew how recent incidents had softened the former sunlight of her loveliness into this half-subdued tone. When in the midst of a brilliant company, with flowers upon her brow and diamonds on her neck, none of those who surrounded her suspected that the former rested above a brain that had throbbed to the most harrowing affliction, or that the latter lay above a heart where love, the fairest of all the gems of the soul, had become lustreless for ever.

It was in the first month of the year 1828 that Mrs. Bailey gave a more than usually grand party, for the purpose of doing honour to a guest of the highest rank who was to be present. This was the Duke of Marchmont. He was a man in his fifty-fifth year, tall and upright, of a lofty demeanour, a severe and thoughtful expression of countenance. His bearing had all the aristocratic hauteur of his high rank, attempered, however, by the manners of a polished gentleman. His face was long, his features were prominent, his complexion was pale, almost to sallowness, but he had evidently been very handsome in his time, and might still be pronounced a fine man. His hair and whiskers, once dark, were now of a grayish tinge, but his teeth were so admirably preserved, and so singularly white for a person of his age, that when he smiled they gave to his countenance a younger aspect. He had never been married, and had not until recently worn a ducal coronet upon his brow.

Such was the Duke of Marchmont, — a nobleman possessed of great wealth, with a splendid town mansion, and three palatial residences, with their accompanying estates, in three distinct counties. Many a cap, to use a vulgar phrase, was therefore set at this great peer; many a manœuvring mother made excruciating efforts to lead the ducal attention to her marriageable daughters. Hitherto all in vain; but on the night of Mrs. Bailey's grand entertainment, his Grace's heart seemed to be smitten. He was evidently fascinated with the bewitching beauty of one fair creature there, and this was Eliza Lacey. But the young lady herself was the only one present who did not observe anything pointed or marked in the duke's attentions. Mingled with her resignation, there was a kind of dreamy, listless apathy which still clung to her, as if the senses had not as yet completely recovered the stunning influence of the blow they had received several months back. Weeks passed on; at every entertainment given by Mrs. Bailey, the Duke of Marchmont was sure to be present; at whatsoever house Eliza visited in company with her relative, there was the duke likewise sure to be. He was paying his addresses to her as visibly and as sedulously as a man could; everybody else saw and knew it, — the object of these attentions alone remained unaware that they were proffered. She still continued to look forth upon the world as if from the midst of a mental dreaminess within; there was something more mechanical than voluntary in her conversation, her looks, and her smiles, in her bearing, too, and in all her movements. But inasmuch as there was a consistent uniformity in her tone and demeanour, with an ineffable sweetness over all, it could not possibly have struck any but the very closest observer of human nature that in the still waters of her soul a profound grief lay buried. Such observers are not often found in the gay circles of fashionable life, and the Duke of Marchmont himself, though shrewd and intelligent, was not much versed in the reading of the female heart.

At length the duke took an opportunity to make an offer of his hand to Miss Lacey. She heard him with an astonishment perfectly bewildering, but which gave to her an air of modest, maidenly confusion. She could not utter a word: a veil had suddenly fallen from her eyes, — the haze through which she had looked upon things around her abruptly yielded to clearness. She comprehended for the first time that she had been the object of attentions bestowed for several months, and that in the very dreaminess and listlessness of her mind she might have seemed to regard them as welcome because she had accepted them. It was one afternoon when the duke called at Mrs. Bailey's house, and when he found Eliza alone in the drawing-room, that he made her the offer of his hand. Taking her bewildered amazement and the subsequent emotions for bashful confusion, and this confusion for a tacit assent, he raised her hand to his lips, kissed it with respectful tenderness, and intimating that he would seek her father, quitted the room.

Then, more vividly perhaps than for some time past it had done, rose up before Eliza's mental vision the image of the lost Bertram, and clasping her hands convulsively, she sat in dismay, indeed, almost in horror, under the crushing influence of the thought that she had unwittingly proved faithless to that image. The ring with the initial B was in her bosom; it ever lay next to her heart. She drew it forth, kissing it in the resuscitated wildness of her grief, while the tears flowed in torrents from her eyes.

She had grown comparatively calm again, the ring was replaced in her bosom, the traces of her weeping were wiped away, and she was deliberately reflecting how to disabuse the Duke of Marchmont of the error into which he had fallen in supposing that his attentions were agreeable to her, when the door opened and her father entered the room. Though full of infirmities, the old man rushed toward her, caught her in his arms, strained her to his breast, and ere she could give utterance to a word poured forth a perfect deluge of language, thanking her for having accepted her ducal suitor, congratulating himself on living to behold his daughter on the verge of so brilliant an alliance, declaring that his mind was relieved from a myriad anxieties, and ending by assuring her that his gray hairs would now go down in contented resignation to the grave. Eliza was shocked, astounded, and bewildered. She saw that her father's mind was bent upon this match, and that it would literally break his heart if she rejected the ducal overture. Yet her brain whirled; it was almost maddened at the idea of becoming another's, — she who in her own soul had vowed a life of celibacy to the memory of her lost lover! Her father renewed his thanks, renewed his own self-congratulations, wept, laughed, danced, and behaved like the veriest child. Mrs. Bailey entered in the midst of this scene, and embracing Eliza, proffered her own congratulations. The poor young lady was overwhelmed with all these demonstrations of exuberant joy; she strove to speak — her tongue refused utterance to what she would have said, — her emotions choked her; and when she burst into tears, she was again embraced by her father and Mrs. Bailey in their turns.

In the course of that day, however, she found an opportunity to speak with her sire alone, and she also spoke with calmness. She assured him that she did not love the duke, that the love she had borne for Bertram was the first and the last of which her soul was susceptible, and that her heart was entombed in the watery depths which had engulfed the adored lost one. Captain Lacey was at first half-frantic at the idea of his daughter rejecting this brilliant alliance; he wept, he knelt, he prayed, he beat his breast, he tore his hair, he threw himself, grovelling in wretchedness, upon the carpet. Oh, could the affectionate daughter resist that spectacle? She who had ever entertained so illimitable a sense of the many, many sacrifices her father had made for her, — she who had always held herself ready to make any sacrifice for him. We will not dwell upon this distressing scene; suffice it to say that at the expiration of an hour — in which all the acutest feelings through which the human soul can pass were essentialized and concentrated — Eliza yielded. With the resignation of martyrdom, with the calm, pale, statue-like despair of a victim consenting to self-immolation for some purpose of stupendous import, she agreed to become the bride of the Duke of Marchmont.

But there was one stipulation which she positively laid down. It was now the close of April, 1828; upwards of a couple of months must elapse until the two years should be completed since her father's written pledge to Bertram Vivian that under certain circumstances the engagement with him should be renewed, and though the afflicted Eliza entertained not the faintest hope that there was the possibility of aught occurring, or of a miracle being wrought, to give scope for those circumstances, it nevertheless seemed a superstitiously sacred duty that the full time should run out. And it required also two complete months to finish the year since the intelligence had reached her of Bertram's death, and though circumstances had prevented her from wearing sable garments as a tribute to his memory, her heart at least required the completion of a year's mourning, — a mourning, however, that she knew would be eternal. Her stipulation therefore was that the bridal-day — the day of her immense self-sacrifice — should not be fixed at any date earlier than the month of July. To this her father readily promised concurrence; the principal point was gained, and that was sufficient.

The interval passed far too quickly for the afflicted Eliza, but outwardly she suffered no traces of her soul's utter despair to present themselves. She had made up her mind to self-immolation; she resolved that her martyrdom should excruciate only herself. She felt that she had no right to suffer the duke to perceive that she was a victim; neither did she wish to mar the happiness which her father was now experiencing in the last days of his existence. In short, she armed herself with a preterhuman courage, and but for the paleness of her cheeks and the slight deepening of the air of pensive sadness upon her countenance, no one could have told that another dagger had been driven into her already too cruelly wounded heart.

On the 10th of July, 1828, the marriage was solemnized, with some degree of privacy, and only in the midst of a select circle, none of the duke's relatives being present. His Grace had his own reasons for not inviting to the bridal those who were most nearly allied to him, inasmuch as his marriage was a fatal blow — or at least might prove so, if blessed with issue — to all who would profit by his death if he remained single. And Captain Lacey had his own reasons likewise for encouraging the duke in the idea of private nuptials, but what these reasons were, he explained not beforehand to his daughter. She herself asked no questions; she knew not even the names of the duke's relatives, nor who they were; she sought to know nothing more than circumstances brought to her knowledge, and this knowledge was limited to the fact that he on whom she bestowed her hand was the Duke of Marchmont, and that she was now a duchess.

CHAPTER III

THE DUCHESS OF MARCHMONT

THE ceremony was over, the wedding-breakfast, given by Mrs. Bailey, and which was of a most splendid description, likewise reached an end, the instant was approaching when Eliza, now Duchess of Marchmont, was to bid adieu to her father and her relative, and accompany her husband to whichsoever of the country-seats it was where the honeymoon was to be passed, but which the young bride knew not. She was even ignorant of the very names of them all. Retiring from the breakfast-table, she sought the chamber where her maid was in readiness to assist her in making the requisite change in her apparel for the journey, and it struck strange, almost unnatural to Eliza's ear when she was addressed as " your Grace " and " my lady." Her toilet being finished, she repaired to a parlour where she knew, according to an intimation given by her maid, that her father wished to say a few words to her in private, and bestow without restraint the last embrace before she was separated from him. There she found the old man in a state of happiness strangely blended with a nervous excitement, but assuredly not with grief at the prospect of parting. Not but that he loved his daughter dearly, as the reader well knows; his pride, however, was too highly gratified, his relief from cares on account of her future welfare was too complete, and perhaps his satisfaction at the result of his plans was too full, to leave room for aught savouring of sorrow. Only that nervous excitement was blended, as a sort of alloy, with his other feelings, and this the unsophisticated Eliza took for the tinge of grief which it was natural to suppose that he experienced, but which he really did not feel.

" My dearest girl," he said, clasping her in his arms, " your beauty and your worth have raised you to the highest pinnacle. Once more — and for the last time — must I allude to something connected with the past."

Here the duchess shuddered as if with a glacial chill shooting through her, although it was the sultry month of July. Her pale countenance became paler, and her hand was instinctively placed upon her heart, for there was Bertram Vivian's ring concealed.

"Only a few words," said Captain Lacey, quickly, for he saw this emotion and comprehended it. "You now belong to another; you are the bride of a nobleman whose honour is unimpeachable, as his rank is lofty and his wealth immense. I need scarcely tell you, Eliza, that he knows nothing of the past, and if you be wise, if you be prudent, if indeed you wish to be kind and considerate toward him, you will cherish that as your own secret, or, rather, forget that it ever was."

"I cannot, father," said Eliza, in a low, deep voice. "I cannot forget it. But, as you have observed, it is my secret, and it shall remain so. Let me relieve you of all apprehension on that head. I am now the duke's wife; I comprehend all that is becoming on my part in my new position. I should feel honoured and flattered by his preference of me, did I possess a heart still capable of being moved by such feelings, but at least I shall be careful not to wound nor shock my husband by suffering him to know that I have loved another, that I cannot love him, that the power of loving a second time is dead within me."

"Dearest daughter," exclaimed Captain Lacey, "I am delighted and distressed to hear you speak thus, — delighted to find that you so admirably appreciate the duties of your new position, distressed to think that the memory of the past is still so strong within you."

"Father," replied Eliza, earnestly, "distress not yourself on my account. It is done; I am resigned, if I be not contented. No, distress not yourself; but God grant that all possible happiness may be yours for the remainder of your days," and as she uttered these last words, tears trickled slowly down the pale cheeks of the Duchess of Marchmont.

"Eliza, my darling," said the old man, much moved, "let me see you exercise a becoming fortitude."

"I am strong, and I am calm, too, again, father," responded the duchess, wiping away her tears. "What other counsel have you to give me ere we separate?"

"Only a few words more," resumed Captain Lacey. "I might say much — I might tell you many things, but the time is too short now, the carriage is at the door, your ducal husband is waiting to bear away his beloved bride. And, moreover," continued the old man, with an increase of that nervous excitement which his daughter mistook for sorrow at the approach of the parting moment, "it would arouse too many painful feelings, too many sad recollections. But yet, my darling daughter, there are a few words which must be spoken. You may perhaps shortly hear names mentioned in your presence which will vividly recall that past to which I have alluded. You may discover, too, that your marriage has given you connections which — But no matter. It is only a single word of parting advice that I have time or fortitude enough to proffer, and that is to conjure you to be upon your guard, so that whatever you may hear shall not lead you to betray to your husband that you were at one time the betrothed of another."

"Father," replied the duchess, with a glacial firmness of tone and a statue-like immovability of features and of form, so that not a muscle of her countenance was stirred by affliction, nor the folds of her splendid scarf agitated by the bosom's heavings, "you have seen with what fortitude I have passed through the ordeal of this day's ceremony; you have seen likewise that by my conduct I have never once given the Duke of Marchmont ground for the supposition that he is an object of the merest indifference to me. By all this let my future conduct be judged; by what I am you may estimate what I shall be. Yes, I am firm. My destiny is fixed, and I accept it. Even if he whose image is dearer to me than I can express were by a miracle to be brought back to life, were he suddenly to stand before me, I feel that I am nerved with the courage, — it may be of despair, — but nevertheless it is the courage that alone is adequate to support me even through such an ordeal as that. Now, father, are you satisfied?"

Singular and incomprehensible was for an instant the expression which flitted over the old man's features; the next moment it was succeeded by one of gladness, indubitable, unmistakable, and straining his daughter to his breast, he exclaimed, "I thank thee, beloved Eliza, for these assurances. Go, my darling; the moment is come for us to separate. Go, and may a father's blessing attend thee as a talisman to keep thy mind thus firm, thus nerved."

The young duchess was to a certain extent struck by her father's look, manner, and words, which appeared somewhat singular, but Mrs. Bailey entered at the moment to announce that the carriage was in readiness. She embraced her sire again, she embraced her relative also; and then issuing forth, found her husband ready to escort her to the magnificent equipage.

And now she was seated by that husband's side in the carriage with ducal arms emblazoned on the panels, symbolic of the almost princely rank to which that day she had been admitted as a partner. The four horses, guided and urged along by the two expert postilions, dashed through the streets, and in a short space London was left behind. Eliza, while responding with that pensive sweetness which had become habitual to her, to the remarks which the duke made, revolved in her soul all the details of the parting counsel which her father had given to her, and it was not very long before her presence of mind and her fortitude were put to the test. For in the course of an affectionate and endearing speech, the duke gave her to understand that they were on their way to the most splendid of his three country-seats, that it was situated in Hampshire, and that its name was Oaklands.

A glacial thrill shot through her like an electric shock at the mention of that name, but she was so completely on her guard that her countenance betrayed nought of what was agitating within. In case, however, that it should, she looked from the window for a few moments, as if contemplating the scenery by which they were passing, but she gazed on vacancy. Oaklands! that was the country-seat to which Bertram Vivian had repaired when he parted from her at Oxford, and it belonged to the family of which he himself was a scion. How, then, could it now be in the possession of the duke her husband?

"We shall be there," continued his Grace, "completely by ourselves at first, and this seclusion, my beloved Eliza, I hope will not prove disagreeable or monotonous."

"Nothing, my lord," she answered, with her accustomed sweet amiability, "that is consistent with your will and pleasure can be objectionable to me."

"Thanks, my sweet Eliza, for that response," and her husband pressed her hand to his lips. "In due time you will be introduced to the other members of the family, or, rather, they will be presented to you, and then we will have a gay company at Oaklands. Your father and Mrs. Bailey shall join us, and my own sweet Eliza shall do the honours of the house of which I am proud and happy to make her the mistress."

The duchess gave a suitable response, and as the journey was continued, the discourse was continued also, but nothing more was said by the duke to put his bride's fortitude and presence of mind to the test. Yet Oaklands — that name of Oaklands — kept agitating in her brain. She longed to ask her husband how it was that this estate had fallen into his possession, but she dared not; and as he said nought upon the subject, she supposed he either took it for granted that she was already informed thereon, or else that he considered it to be a matter of but little moment.

After a four hours' rapid drive, the duke informed Eliza that they were now entering upon the estate, and in another half-hour an antique edifice, appearing above the embowering groves, broke upon the view. This was Oaklands. And she was about to set foot within those walls, to tread where Bertram had trodden, to sit where he had sat, to gaze upon objects which were familiar to him in his lifetime. As the equipage dashed along a noble sweep of carriage-way through a vast and superbly wooded park, she thought to herself that every tree which reared its stately head there had been known to Bertram, that she was now passing amongst scenes where he also had passed, she was breathing, as it were, the very air which he had breathed. It was sufficient to resuscitate all the anguish of her affliction for his loss; it was enough to overpower her with irresistible emotions. But her soul was nerved with a preterhuman fortitude, and however much she might have felt internally her pale countenance betrayed nothing of all this.

The equipage dashed up to the front of the splendid mansion, and troops of domestics came forth from the hall to welcome their ducal master and his lovely bride. She ascended to a chamber to change her dress, and perhaps if she had been alone, she might have given way to the pent-up feelings that were agitating in her soul. But she was attended by two maids, and she dared not betray any inordinate emotion in their presence.

Some days passed, during which nothing particular occurred that requires mention. In the meanwhile the duchess had inspected all the apartments of the immense mansion, and though, by the sumptuous elegance of the fashionable dwellings she had seen in London, she was prepared for all the evidences of boundless wealth in her new home, yet its splendour far eclipsed all her foreshadowings. One portion only remained unvisited, and this was the picture-gallery, which was under repair at the time of her arrival. Those repairs were finished, and one morning the duke proposed that she should inspect the place, which contained, as he stated, not only some paintings by eminent masters, but likewise the portraits of many of his oldest ancestors, as well as of his relatives who were more recently deceased. Thither they repaired. The paintings by the great masters occurred first in the gallery, and then came the portraits. Those of the duke's elder ancestors engendered no particular sentiment beyond mere interest and curiosity, but when Eliza reached those of the relatives who were but recently deceased, strange thoughts and feelings began to take birth in her mind, — thoughts that seemed to be expanding into memories, feelings that appeared to connect the present with the past; and as she gazed with a growing wonderment, and even with consternation, the bewildering fancy which was at first dim, vague, and shapeless strengthened into a conviction that there was in these portraits a pervasive family similitude from which a never-to-be-forgotten image was neither estranged nor disconnected. But the last portrait of all which hung in the array of successive family delineations — Eliza almost shrieked out as her eyes riveted their looks upon it. It represented a much older man than Bertram, but the resemblance between them was so striking, it seemed as if the original could have been none other than Bertram's father.

Strange suspicions and wild fancies swept through Eliza's mind, but her agitation was concentrated within. The very tremor which thrilled through her was one of the soul rather than of the body; outwardly she was calm and serene, or at least the duke observed nothing strange nor unusual on the part of his wife. For a moment she averted her eyes from the portrait. She thought, she hoped, that what she fancied might be a delusion produced by the circumstances of one image being ever uppermost in her mind, and that therefore perhaps in her morbid imaginings she beheld that image to a certain degree reflected in the canvas before her. But as again she glanced along the array of the last half-dozen scions of her husband's family, or rather, their representations there, back to her mind came the conviction that it was no creation of the fancy, but that the pervasive resemblance was there, commencing feebly with the scion most remote, strengthening visibly with each of those that followed, until settling into that unmistakable similitude of a paternal prototype. Therefore, again were her eyes riveted upon this last, and all her acutest memories were painfully revived, — memories of the lost, the dead, the ever loved.

" That," said the duke, who still perceived nothing strange on the part of his wife, but merely attributed to a natural curiosity and interest the intentness with which her survey was fixed upon the last portrait of all those belonging to the family into which she had so recently entered, — " that one represents my younger brother, the late Lord Clandon, who died a little more than a year back. It was most unfortunate, just after he had been raised to the peerage, at the same time that my marquisate was raised to a dukedom."

" And the title of your marquisate, my lord? " said Eliza, in a tone of inquiry, and though she stood still as a marble statue, ineffable feelings were agitating within.

" The title to which I succeeded by the death of an old uncle a little more than two years back," replied her husband, " was that of Viviandale. Shortly afterward it was elevated to the Dukedom of Marchmont. That same death rendered my younger brother Lord Vivian, but a lord only by courtesy, and he was raised to the peerage by the style and title of Baron Clandon."

" And previously to that death which first of all made him a lord by courtesy," said the duchess, " I presume he was simply the Honourable Mr. Vivian? Forgive my ignorance upon these subjects — "

And she stopped short. Not another word could she utter;

more powerful still, indeed almost overwhelming, were the feelings that agitated in her soul.

" I am charmed, dearest, that you thus question me," responded the uxorious duke, " and I am delighted to answer your questions. Yes, my younger brother was merely the Honourable Mr. Vivian until about two years back. But, as I was explaining to you just now, it is a little more than a year since he died suddenly. Ah, Eliza, there were cruel circumstances connected with his death. In a word, he received a very painful shock. It was the intelligence from America that his younger son — his best beloved — had perished — Good heavens, Eliza dearest, are you ill? "

" No, my lord, no, it is nothing, I can assure you," said the duchess, quickly, as she instantaneously recovered her self-possession. " This place struck cold to me — "

" Yes, dearest, it is cold," said the uxorious duke, though in reality the sultry sun of July was pouring its effulgence upon the entire glowing scene without. " The painters and gilders, the burnishers and decorators, as well as the picture-cleaners, have been here. But perhaps it is the odour of turpentine and paint which has even affected you more than the cold? Come, let us away. We will revisit the gallery on another occasion."

Eliza, pale as a marble statue, took her husband's arm, and accompanied him forth from the gallery. On the landing without, they encountered one of the footmen, and the duke bade him express his displeasure to the steward for not having taken measures to rid the gallery of the disagreeable odour which filled it. He moreover ordered fires to be lighted there, declaring that it was damp, and that what with the exhalation of the paint and the moist chill, her Grace had been rendered quite unwell. Eliza pleaded headache, and withdrew to her own boudoir, where she shut herself up to deliberate on all that had just passed.

A veil had fallen from her eyes. She now understood full well — too well — the meaning of those words of caution which her father had uttered in the last moments preceding their separation. She had married into the very family to which Bertram belonged; her husband was none other than the uncle of her lost loved one. That her father all along knew such to be the case, she could not possibly conceal from herself, but that the fact had been religiously concealed from her, both by her parent and Mrs. Bailey, was equally certain. That the duke himself should never have spoken in a manner to make her aware of the circumstance was not to be wondered at, for he had never talked to her about any of his relatives at all, and this silence on his part she could now likewise understand. For a man of his years to take unto himself a young wife was of course galling to that expectant kindred which had so much to gain by his dying childless. It would therefore have been a delicate topic for him to touch upon, and without any other motive had he avoided it, for he himself was utterly ignorant of bygone circumstances in respect to Eliza and Bertram, — ignorant even that they had ever been acquainted. It was still further apparent that in respect to the Vivian family, certain promotions in the aristocratic hierarchy had given loftier titles, accompanied by changes in their distinctive names, so that not for an instant could she have possibly suspected that the Marquis of Viviandale had been elevated into the ducal grandeur of Marchmont; and if by chance the name of Lord Clandon had ever fallen upon her ear, she would have had no possible clue to associate it with the family to which the lost Bertram had belonged. But now she comprehended it all, and again and again recurred the astounding thought that by a wondrous combination of circumstances she had entered the family which it was at one time the hope of her heart to enter, but that this entrance was effected, not as at that time she had so fondly anticipated, — it was by her becoming the bride of the uncle, and not of the dearly cherished nephew, that the consummation was brought about.

Oh, how she had been sacrificed! But so strong was the filial feeling in the bosom of this excellent young lady — so completely was it interwoven in her very nature — that even in the depth of her own anguished feelings she sought excuses for her father. He had longed to behold her settled in life; it was, after all, natural that his ambition should covet this haughty alliance for his daughter. He had acted only with the conscientiousness of a parent, and if in so doing he had driven deeper down into her heart the dagger that was already planted there, it was with no studied intent to inflict additional pain. No rancour therefore might her gentle bosom harbour against him, and to strengthen herself in the continuance of her filial love, to fortify also the extenuation which she conjured up for whatsoever duplicity or concealment there might have been in his recent conduct, she bethought herself of all the manifold sacrifices he had made for her in her girlhood. Yet amidst all these reflections would come the sickening, blighting, blasting one that she had been rendered by circumstances doubly perfidious, as it were, to the memory of the lost but ever loved, that she had not merely become the wife of another, but that other a near relative of the cherished and deplored one. A vague sense of having committed even a crime, a dim, undefined idea of having been thrown into a position which by its associations and connections revolted against the natural purity of her thoughts, filled her soul with consternation and dismay. But it was done, her destiny was fixed, and she must bear her burden and resign herself to the lot in the best manner that she could. Above all, she must scrupulously continue to veil from her husband the sorrow which rested in the depths of her soul, — that hidden sorrow which she would carry with her to the grave.

About six weeks passed away, and the portrait-gallery was not revisited. If ever the duke started a proposition of the kind, Eliza was ready with a suggestion for some other recreative pursuit. There was this part of the estate still to visit, or there was that part which she should like to see again. In the same way, too, when occasionally her husband seemed to be approaching the topic of his younger brother's death and the causes which led to it, Eliza was equally ready with some observation to turn the discourse into quite another channel; and in order to do this effectually, she would assume a sudden liveliness, perfectly genuine in the estimation of the enraptured and uxorious duke, but in reality fraught with the nervousness of a feverish excitement often bordering on the hysterical.

Thus the period of the honeymoon passed away, and one morning, at breakfast-time, the Duke of Marchmont said, "My dearest Eliza, we may now think of deviating somewhat from the routine which perhaps is becoming monotonous to you. We must have a little gaiety at Oaklands, and to tell you the truth, I had arranged what ought to have been a surprise for you, but I cannot keep the secret any longer. Your father and Mrs. Bailey will be here in the afternoon. Our friends Sir William and Lady Lomax and their three daughters — who were present, you know, at the happy ceremony which made you mine — are likewise coming to pass a week with us. Tell me, dear Eliza, are you pleased with these arrangements?"

The duke studied his utmost to render himself and all his plans agreeable to his young bride, and with her habitual amiability, she expressed her gratitude and her satisfaction.

"And there is another guest, too, whom we may expect this evening in time for the dinner-hour," continued the duke. "My nephew, Lord Clandon, who has just returned from a long Continental tour, has written to offer his congratulations on my marriage, and to express his earnest desire to pay his respects to my beautiful duchess. The letter is altogether nicely and prettily worded, with a manly generosity and frankness, too, for which," added the duke, almost involuntarily, and in a sort of musing strain, "I should scarcely have given Hugh credit. However," he went on hastily to observe, as if ashamed at having thus betrayed even the slightest fear as to the impression which his marriage might have made upon his nephew, "I have answered him kindly, and invited him to visit us."

Again did the mention of that name of Clandon call up with painful vividness the memories of the past, — those memories which were in reality never absent from Eliza's mind, but which unless thus stirred up floated only with the sereneness of resignation, as a sort of perpetual undercurrent of the thoughts. Yet though thus strongly agitated within, her countenance betrayed nothing of what she felt.

In the course of the afternoon Mrs. Bailey's travelling-chariot dashed up to the grand entrance of Oaklands, and Eliza was clasped in the arms of her father. He mistook the filial enthusiasm of her embrace for an evidence of complete satisfaction and happiness on account of the alliance which she had formed, and whatsoever apprehensions had previously filled his mind on that score were dissipated in a moment. But when Eliza came to regard Captain Lacey attentively, she perceived that he was looking exceedingly ill, and that the smiles which her presence and his own relieved thoughts conjured up beamed upon a countenance that was thin, haggard, and careworn. She comprehended all that he must have felt on her account, — his deep anxiety lest his parting injunctions should have been disregarded, and that she might have betrayed the past when made aware of the family into which she had married. Pained by his appearance, she lavished upon him the most tender caresses, and the old man's happiness now appeared as complete as the pride of his ambition had already been. As for Mrs. Bailey, it was a proud thing for her to be enabled to salute a duchess as her relative; so that in the increased consequence and importance which it gave her, she found infinite reason for self-congratulation at having taken the captain and his daughter by the hand in the moment of their need.

A little later in the afternoon Sir William and Lady Lomax, with their three daughters, arrived, and as the dinner-hour drew near, several other guests — dwellers in the neighbourhood of Oaklands — were introduced. But still there was one to arrive whose appearance Eliza deeply dreaded. This was Lord Clandon. When at Oxford, she had never seen Hugh; she was likewise aware that Bertram had never breathed to his brother a syllable of their love, and it was not therefore through fear that this would be betrayed to the duke that the duchess dreaded to encounter Lord Clandon. But she thought to herself that if Lord Clandon bore a resemblance to the lost Bertram, her presence of mind would be put to the sorest, severest test it had as yet experienced, and she would have to pass through an ordeal fraught with anguish and mental agony to which the tortures of the rack were paradise in comparison. But the dinner-hour came, and Lord Clandon made not his appearance. After waiting some time, the duke decided that the banquet should be served up. It was so, — the ladies in due course adjourned to the drawing-room, where in another hour they were joined by the gentlemen. It was now past nine o'clock, and Eliza was just congratulating herself that the dreaded meeting would be postponed until the following day, when the sounds of an equipage dashing up to the front of the mansion reached her ears. Now she summoned all her fortitude to her aid, — all her presence of mind. Sir William Lomax — a tall, thin, aristocratic-looking man, far advanced in years — was conversing with her at the time, and this perhaps was fortunate for her, inasmuch as if younger and more penetrating eyes had been fixed upon her countenance, the evidences of a strong inward trouble might have been read. The drawing-room door was thrown open, and a domestic announced, in a loud voice, " Lord Clandon."

The duke greeted his nephew warmly, and there was something in his cordial clasp of the hand which seemed to convey a heartfelt gratitude for the generous, frank, and magnanimous manner in which Hugh had expressed himself with regard to a marriage which he had in reality so little reason to like. For Lord Clandon, in default of issue, was the heir to the estates and title of Marchmont, and this alliance on the part of his uncle with a young wife only just twenty-one years of age naturally gave every promise that Hugh's hopes and expectations would be disappointed.

" Welcome, my dear nephew, to Oaklands," said the duke. " And now permit me at once to present you to one to whom you are anxious to become known."

Eliza had not dared fling even a single glance toward the door when it opened. She rose from her seat, and stood motionless, a wild excitement in her mind, but with all the outward appearance of the unstudied grace of a serene and dignified self-possession. There was confusion in her brain, a veil before her eyes; Sir William Lomax was saying something to her, she knew not what it was. His voice and the voices of all the others in the room seemed like an unintelligible blending of humming, droning sounds. She heard persons approaching her; then her husband's voice said, " Eliza, I have pleasure in introducing my nephew, Lord Clandon."

All in an instant she became vividly, frightfully, terribly aware of the necessity of exerting her fortitude to the utmost. And it came, like a wondrous inspiration. She raised her eyes; she beheld before her a fine, tall, handsome man, really not more than a few months past four and twenty, though looking three or four years older. His hair was of jetty darkness, and wanted the rich gloss and the silky fineness to make it resemble that of the lost Bertram. His features, somewhat largely chiseled, were haughtily handsome, yet with the traces of either fatigue or dissipation in his lineaments. But altogether there was a sufficiency, more than a sufficiency of a family likeness to bring back the image of Bertram most vividly to her mind, even if at the moment any such impulse should have been wanting at all. Nevertheless, Eliza's self-possession remained. The astonishment which she experienced at her own fortitude amounted almost to a feeling of gladness; and thus was it with a smile and with all her habitual sweetness of manner that she gave Hugh her hand, welcoming him to Oaklands.

Lord Clandon's demeanour was alike respectful and friendly, or it might be termed delicately courteous, toward her whom, though three years younger than himself, marriage had made his aunt. The duke and Sir William Lomax remained chatting with them for a few minutes, and then the former, taking the baronet's arm, sauntered away to another part of the room, for the purpose of leaving his wife and nephew to get over the first restraints and awkwardness of an introduction and become better acquainted with each other. Eliza resumed her seat; Lord Clandon, with fashionable ease, sank upon a chair near her, and at once began to converse on the current topics of the day. He spoke of the Italian opera, of the last new novel, of a drama which had made "a great hit," and of two or three approaching "marriages in high life." Then he spoke of his travels in foreign parts, and he related several adventures which had befallen him, but in a pleasing manner, and without any offensive egotism.

He was evidently a man of the world, well accustomed to all the usages of the sphere in which he moved, and by his discourse the impression was conveyed that he had a great deal of frankness and high-mindedness in his disposition. Such was the opinion Eliza formed of him, and indeed it was all the more natural she should do so, not merely because there was no appearance on his part of a studied straining to make that impression, but likewise because he spoke in the kindest and most dutiful terms of his uncle, at the same time treating the duchess herself with a courtesy which had all the friendliness proper to subsist between relatives, and all the respect which so young a man was bound in delicacy to show toward the still more youthful bride of an elderly relation.

Presently Lord Clandon was introduced to Captain Lacey; and when the latter, after some little conversation, had retired to the card-room, to form one at a rubber of whist, Lord Clandon said to Eliza, "Is it possible that you ever resided at Oxford?"

The duchess had for the previous half-hour been prepared for some such question as this, and it was therefore without any visible trepidation that she replied in the affirmative. But she said no more, and no inquiring look was thrown upon Hugh, to seek the motive of the question.

"It struck me," continued Lord Clandon, "when I read the account of your marriage in the newspaper, — I was then in Paris, by the bye, — that the name of Captain Lacey, who was mentioned as your Grace's father, was not altogether unfamiliar to me, and the moment your venerable parent was just now introduced to me, I felt persuaded I had seen him before. Yes, I recollect, he was once pointed out to me at Oxford — But perhaps your Grace is unaware that I myself passed a couple of years in that city? Indeed, I am afraid," he added, with a smile, "that we collegians were not considered steady enough for reception into private families."

Eliza slowly turned her looks upon Lord Clandon, to assure herself whether there was any hidden meaning in his remark, — any pointed allusion to the one exception which had been made in favour of his brother Bertram with regard to a reception at Captain Lacey's house at Oxford; but she was convinced that he intended nothing, and that it was merely in a conversational manner he had thus spoken.

"Yes," said Eliza, in answer to a question which he had put, "I was aware that you were at Oxford."

"It is somewhat singular," Hugh went on to observe, "that we should have been in the same town a comparatively short while back, yet such total strangers to each other, and now that we should meet — for me," he added, with a smile and a gentle inclination of the head, "to have the honour of addressing your Grace as a relation. Let me see, it was two years last June since I and my brother Bertram left Oxford. I can assure you I was by no means sorry; I was getting heartily tired of the same kind of life, though it was all pleasure. But then pleasures pall upon the senses," he added, with the languid tone and the jaded look of a man who had drunk to satiety of that cup of pleasure whereof he spoke. "As for Bertram, I don't know how it was, but he was wretched to a degree at leaving college. Perhaps he was not quite so wild as I was, and had rather a fancy for his studies. Don't think the worse of me because I now confess that little wildness on my part. When it is gone and past, one may talk of it. Bertram was more sentimental and serious than I — "

At this moment the duchess dropped her handkerchief, which Lord Clandon hastened to pick up for her. It had fallen from her hand, as a faintness coming over her made her fair fingers relax their hold upon it. Within the last few minutes the name of Bertram had been mentioned half a dozen times in her hearing; it would have been sufficient for this mere mention to agitate her profoundly, but when she heard the name — that sacred, loved, lamented name — thrown forth from the lips with what appeared to be the mingled levity and callousness of one who, although his brother, could yet speak of him as if the recollection of his loss were unaccompanied with a single regret, it was sufficient to overwhelm all Eliza's fortitude in a moment and make her sink down beneath the influence of her excruciated feelings. Again, however, did a species of preterhuman self-possession come to her aid; the little incident of the handkerchief startled her into a vivid consciousness of the peculiarities and perils of her position, and her countenance was serene once more.

Lord Clandon was already continuing the same topic, when Sir William Lomax advanced with his wonted stiff stateliness of manner, and with his eyes half-closed, — for he thought that this appearance gave him an air of intellectual consequence, — and joining in the conversation, he turned it upon another topic. But all of a sudden the door opened somewhat hastily, — hastily enough to startle the inmates of the room, and to stop the music which a piano was sending forth beneath the fingers of a young lady. It was Mrs. Bailey who made her appearance, and hastening up to the duchess, with a look of ill-subdued agitation, she said, " Do not be frightened — pray do not be frightened. We hope it is nothing, but your Grace's father — "

" My father? " echoed Eliza, starting up to her feet in sudden terror.

" Pray do not be frightened. It is but a slight fit, and fortunately, Doctor Rodney being one of the guests — "

The duchess waited to hear no more; she rushed wildly from the room, and in a few moments knew the worst. Captain Lacey, while seated at the card-table, had been stricken down by paralysis, which had deprived him of consciousness.

CHAPTER IV

THE CONTENTS OF THE DESK

How uncertain are the affairs of this life! The mutations from weal to woe are as often of lightning rapidity as of gradual stealthy movement, and swift as the changes of the magic lantern may the scene shift from the brilliantly lighted saloon where music fills the perfumed atmosphere, to the chamber of death where the sounds of weeping prevail. Thus was it at the ducal mansion of Oaklands. At the very instant that soft melody was flowing upon the ears in one apartment, and cards were being played in another, the sable wing of the Destroyer was unfolding itself above that high, antique roof; the music was to cease suddenly in consternation, the victim's last card was played!

It was long past the hour of midnight. Captain Lacey was stretched in a sumptuous couch, plunged in that last sleep which paralysis often brings, and from which there is to be no awaking in this world. Eliza knelt by the side of that couch, with her father's hand pressed to her lips. She was weeping, not loudly and bitterly, but in that low, continuous manner which perhaps indicates a deeper and more concentrated anguish of the soul. The duke stood near her, and frequently did he bend down to whisper a few lowly uttered but tender and earnest words in her ear, imparting such solace as in existing circumstances could be given. Doctor Rodney was near the head of the bed, watching with an ominous countenance the evidences of the soul's approaching transition from its mortal tenement into the regions of immortality. The old housekeeper — summoned to officiate as a nurse, though the patient was indeed well-nigh beyond all human ministrations — was likewise there. Every possible assistance had been rendered, every available means adopted to grapple with the Destroyer's power, but vainly and ineffectually; Eliza's father was on his death-bed. As the gray dawn of morning glimmered in through the casements and made the wax lights burn pale, the spirit passed out of the form which for several hours had remained in slumbering unconsciousness.

The duke led his deeply afflicted wife away from the chamber, and besought her to seek rest in her own boudoir. Even in the midst of her acute anguish, her profound sorrow, she could not help being smitten with a sense of her husband's considerate kindness toward her, and for the first time, perhaps, since the marriage ring was placed upon her finger, she pressed his hand with a sincerely felt warmth. We will not linger upon this scene. The reader who already comprehends the tenderness of Eliza's heart, and the full extent of her devoted attachment toward her father, can picture to himself the immensity of the sorrow which her soul experienced. The funeral took place, and the remains of Captain Lacey were consigned to a vault in the village church at Oaklands, about a mile distant from the ducal mansion. Thus how soon did the gloom of a funeral succeed to the gaiety of a wedding, how soon did mourning garments clothe the exquisitely fair form which had lately been arrayed in a bridal dress!

Captain Lacey had brought his writing-desk in his portmanteau to Oaklands. The duke, through kindest consideration for his beloved duchess, caused every article belonging to her deceased father to be carefully put out of sight, save and except that writing-desk, which he thought might possibly contain papers, perhaps a will; for his Grace was not altogether acquainted with his departed father-in-law's pecuniary circumstances. At all events he considered that whatever there might be in the desk, it was the sacred duty of Eliza alone to open it. Therefore, at the expiration of about a month after the funeral, — when the first bitterness of anguish had passed, and the mind of the bereaved daughter was becoming subdued down into the serenity of a holy and pious resignation, — the duke one day took that desk into her boudoir, presented her with the key, which had been found in the deceased's garments, and imprinting a kiss upon her cheek, left her to the fulfilment of a sad but necessary task. Eliza recognized her father's desk in a moment, and again, in the conduct of her husband, did she perceive much delicate consideration, which her heart, though it could not love, was yet enabled to appreciate. The sight of that desk brought tears to her eyes, and thus weeping before she opened it, she was in a measure relieved as well as strengthened to address herself to that duty.

She opened the desk. The first paper she took out was a tress of her mother's hair, — that mother who had died in giving her birth, and whom she had never known. She pressed it to her lips; again she wept, and wiping away her tears, proceeded with her task. The next paper she drew forth was addressed to Captain Lacey, in the well-known hand of Bertram, and she knew the letter likewise. It was the one which he had written from Oaklands, bowing to the decision of Eliza's father that two years were to elapse ere their correspondence should be renewed. She had never seen this letter since the day it arrived, she had never read it but once, yet she now recognized it in a moment, and every line of its contents was imprinted on her memory as if seared there with red-hot iron. Her first impulse was to open and read it again, but she checked herself; the very thought struck her as being an infidelity to her husband. She could not prevent herself from thinking of Bertram, she could not prevent her mind from clinging with a soft, sad, serene affection to his image; she had no power over her own volition. But, on the other hand, she felt that she had no right to do a positive deed which might resuscitate all the frenzy of her regrets for his loss; she had no right to voluntarily seek for the evidences of that love which Heaven had refused to crown with happiness. Therefore, under the influence of this most scrupulous delicacy, Eliza put the letter aside, and again cast her looks into the writing-desk.

But, ah, wherefore does she start? What writing is this which next meets her eye? What letter is that which, addressed to her father, she eagerly, greedily, almost frantically snatches up? She examines the direction, she looks at the postmarks; a faintness comes over her, the letter drops from her hand. She snatches it up again, and again she scrutinizes the postmarks. Thoughts of strange and wild contexture sweep through her mind, — fancies so poignant, so bewildering, so fraught with a solemn wonderment and at the same time a fearful suspense, that they are almost overpowering. A single glance at the interior of that letter would clear up all doubt, relieve her of all suspense; and she knows, she feels, she has the conviction that it will do so, but there is within her a shuddering awful horror to arrive at that certainty. Thoughts so wild, apparently so impossible, are agitating in her brain; and yet what she thinks of is possible, for the proof is there; she holds it in her hand. There is within her the certainty that it is so; and yet she flutters and trembles and quivers with all the doubt of agonizing suspense. This state is intolerable. She opens the letter, she reads, but only a few words and for a few moments; and she sinks down upon her knees with a low, deep, long-drawn, gasping moan, the full meaning of which it would be almost impossible to describe.

Her head is bowed upon the chair from which she has sunk down, her face is buried in her hands, and that boudoir is silent as the grave; not even the pulsations of her heart nor the respirations of her breath are audible. She is motionless as the sculptured effigy of Despair kneeling by a monument of a loved and lost one. Yet it is not that she is in a state of unconsciousness. No, her sense remains, but experienced only as a stunned, dismayed consternation. There is something awful, something profoundly solemn, in the mental condition of that kneeling lady. She weeps not, her bosom is not convulsed; there is not a tremor thrilling through her form, not even the slightest creeping agitation to give sign of life. Yet she lives, but hers are unutterable, ineffable feelings.

Minutes elapse while she thus remains kneeling by the chair, her face buried in her hands. At length slowly, oh, so slowly, she rises up like a ghost ascending from the tomb, and as a ghost she is marble pale. If she caught the reflection of her own image in the mirror opposite, she would start in dismay; she would not believe, in the first shock, that it was herself she beheld imaged there. But she has no outward vision for anything; her eyes behold nothing in the room. All her thoughts, all her senses, all her faculties, are absorbed in one idea which lies at the bottom of her soul.

Again several minutes elapse, and then with a slow, mechanical movement, as if unconscious of the very impulse which she is obeying, Eliza stoops down and picks up the letter which has fallen from her hand, — that letter which has produced all which we have just been describing. And now she sits down and reads it calmly and deliberately. Oh, with what a calmness! It is the calmness which the ocean of hyperborean regions displays when frozen into solid ice, — the calmness of that glacial spell which can alone tranquillize the mighty waters that if the talismanic power were removed would boil and rage in all the wild ebullition of the tempest. It is the calmness of the volcano that sleeps under a power superior to its own, when its lava is hardened into petrifaction, but which, if the spell should be removed, and a spark should be set to the inflammable concrete, would pour forth the gush of the burning levin.

Eliza read the letter mechanically, deliberately, from the first word to the last. It was finished, and then only did she display any outward emotion; then only was it that a strange expression — a sad expression indeed to be seen upon the countenance of one so young and beautiful — passed slowly over her features, while simultaneously a glacial tremor trailed itself as slowly through her entire form.

"I thank thee, O God, for one thing," she said, in a voice which seemed as if borne upon a breath of ice, — "and only for one thing. The rest is all dark — horrible — frightful — incredible!"

It did not seem to strike her that she had given utterance to something savouring of impious blasphemy, in accepting only one of the many dispensations of Providence on which her thoughts were evidently fixed. But she was in that state when the human soul is so chilled by despair that the form to which it belongs is but a breathing, animated marble statue.

She looked over the remaining papers in the desk. There was another letter, in the same handwriting, of a recent date, — a very recent date, — and this also Eliza read. Again were her feelings excited poignantly, horribly, agonizingly; and for some minutes she was convulsed with the tortures of anguish, while the tears rained down her cheeks. She wrung her hands, too, — yes, wrung them bitterly, bitterly; and it was long ere she recovered even the calmness of despair. Then she again looked into the desk, but there was nothing more to interest her. Impossible indeed would it have been for any other paper to produce a state of being more deplorable, more deserving the whole world's commiseration, than those which had already placed a petrifying spell upon the heart of the unhappy Duchess of Marchmont. She locked up all the papers in the desk again, and the desk itself she secured in a bureau of which she kept the key. For the remainder of that day she stayed in her boudoir, sending a message by one of her maids to her husband, to the effect that she begged his kind consideration and wished to be alone.

The duke naturally fancied — as indeed was but too terribly the case — that his wife had found in the contents of the desk something to make her thus court solitude, and he obtruded not his presence upon her. But on the following morning, when she descended to the breakfast-parlour, she expressed her gratitude for all his goodness toward her; and when he saw how pale she was, he thought to himself that the documents she had found in the desk must have revived all her bitterest affliction at her father's loss. He, however, delicately and carefully abstained from breathing a word in allusion to the subject, much less to inquire what the contents of those papers might have been. From that day forth the sadness deepened upon Eliza's countenance, but also blended with a sweeter and holier resignation; her tones acquired that soft plaintiveness of harmony which characterizes the voice that is accustomed to keep down an ebullition of feeling; her cheeks remained pale, but not with a sickly whiteness: it was the perfect transparency of the complexion which loses not its animation when the tint of the rose dies away.

We should observe that Lord Clandon had left Oaklands almost immediately after Captain Lacey's funeral, as did also Mrs. Bailey; the other guests who had been invited to stay there had, for delicacy's sake, taken their leave on the very morning after the demise of the duchess's father. The Duke of Marchmont, thinking that change of scene would contribute to the restoration of his wife's spirits, and that a southern clime during the approaching winter would benefit her health, proposed a visit to Italy. Eliza, ever amiably ready to yield to her husband's wishes in all things, gave her assent in that calmly serene manner, tinged with sadness, which had now become habitual to her, and to Italy they accordingly went.

The winter passed; spring revisited the earth, clothing the trees with a tender verdure, and covering the boughs with blossoms. Summer followed, to expand that verdure into a more brilliant green, and to prepare the boughs for the rich fruitage of autumn. It was in the beginning of September, 1829, — exactly one year from the death of Captain Lacey, — that the Duke and Duchess of Marchmont returned to Oaklands. The duke had some reason to flatter himself that his hopes, when they set out upon their travels, had not been altogether unfulfilled. It was not that the colour had come back to Eliza's cheeks, — that appeared to have gone for ever, — but as there was nought of insipid deadness in the purity of her complexion, her beauty was not marred, only rendered the more interesting. There are some forms which remain uninfluenced by the sorrow which lies deep in the heart; it is ever so when that sorrow exists always the same, breaking not forth in sudden and violent ebullitions, to be succeeded by periods of exhaustion. These cause the wear and tear of the frame, but it is the former state which shows itself but little outwardly, and so it was with the Duchess of Marchmont. Her figure retained all its rounded contours, its rich proportions, its flowing outlines; splendour, elegance, and grace, blended with a touching interest as well as with a becoming dignity, rendered her a being of whom any husband might be proud. And the Duke of Marchmont was proud of his Eliza; he had seen her as much admired in Italy as she had been in England, and he now hoped that as England was reached again, she would mingle in the society which her rank and loveliness qualified her to adorn, and where she would shine as a star of matchless and sweetest beauty.

The Duke of Marchmont's arrangements were that they should remain at Oaklands throughout the autumn, until the Christmas season, when they would remove to the town mansion. His Grace was accustomed to submit to his wife's approval whatsoever he projected; for to her only was he neither proud nor autocratic, and she on her side invariably gave her sweetly and softly expressed assent to all his proposals. But in order that the stay at Oaklands might not be dull nor monotonous, and in order that Eliza might again gradually glide into the gaieties of society, after a year of mourning for her father, the duke suggested that they should entertain a select circle of friends. Accordingly invitations were sent to Mrs. Bailey, to the Lomax family, and to half a dozen other members, male and female, of the fashionable world. They came in due course, and though Eliza received them with her wonted affability, and did the honours of the mansion with a becoming grace and dignity, she experienced no real relief in their society from any of the sorrows that lay deep in the immortal caverns of her heart.

Lord Clandon was at his shooting-box in a midland county when the duke and duchess returned to England. On learning their arrival, he lost no time in writing a dutiful and affectionate letter to his uncle, expressing a hope that the amiable duchess had recovered so far as could be expected from the shock of her father's death. The duke, flattered and gratified by this fresh testimonial of Hugh's complete and generous deference to the head of the family, responded in cordial terms, and invited him to pay a visit to Oaklands. Lord Clandon was unmarried, and the duke jocosely hinted in his letter that it was high time Hugh should think of taking unto himself a partner for life, and that probably amongst the lady guests assembled at Oaklands he might find one who in personal and pecuniary points of view would prove an eligible match. The pecuniary point of view was perhaps the more important for Lord Clandon's consideration, inasmuch as he was far from rich. His income amounted to a bare two thousand a year, — little enough to support his position as a peer, and a mere trifle indeed for one whose habits were expensive and extravagant. The duke well knew that his nephew was thus straitened in his means, and in the same letter which conveyed the invitation to Oaklands he enclosed a cheque upon his banker for a handsome amount. Lord Clandon hastened to acknowledge the epistle and its enclosure, expressing a fervid gratitude for his uncle's considerate kindness, and promising to be at Oaklands at the expiration of a week.

The same post which brought this letter from Hugh brought one from another quarter, likewise addressed to the duke. To this second letter a kind response was likewise returned by his Grace, accompanied by an invitation to Oaklands. And Eliza knew that this letter was received, and that this invitation was given. The answer came, to the effect that the writer would be at Oaklands in the afternoon of the following day.

That afternoon came. The duke and his wife were alone together in the drawing-room, for it so happened that all the guests were out riding or walking in the grounds, enjoying the beauty of that autumnal season. A very close observer — if such a one had been present — might have noticed that the cheeks of the duchess were paler than even their wont, — paler because that animation of the complexion which had survived the fading of the natural carnation tint was temporarily deadened into a complete whiteness. And such an observer, too, would perchance have seen that there was a strange light in the large dark eyes. The duke, however, perceived not all this, for Eliza seemed busily occupied in the contemplation of a number of magnificent prints which one of the guests had brought from London a day or two previously. The duke was standing in one of the bay-windows of the drawing-room, which commanded a view of the carriage road, for he was in expectation of the promised arrival.

It was about four o'clock on this particular afternoon that a post-chaise dashed up to the grand entrance of Oaklands, and the duke exclaimed, "Here he is! More than three years have elapsed since last I saw him."

Eliza remained occupied with the prints, but turning them over more rapidly than at first. The duke went on making observations relative to the individual who had just arrived, but it scarcely seemed as if the duchess heard them, for she gave no response. In a few minutes footsteps were heard approaching the door; that door was thrown open, and a domestic announced, "The Honourable Mr. Bertram Vivian."

CHAPTER V

BERTRAM VIVIAN

Eliza rose from her seat, and the duke took her hand to present her to her relative, — that relative whom he fancied she had never in her life seen before, but, alas! whom she had known so well and loved so tenderly. She was white as a sheet, and her deathlike pallor was rendered all the more visible by the half-mourning garb that she wore. Her raven hair, arranged in massive bands, threw out, as it were, the colourless countenance in its purest marble relief; her lips were of the hue of ashes; but there was a strange light glistening in her eyes as she bowed to Bertram Vivian. Then there was a quick revulsion of feeling within her, pangs of ineffable anguish shooting in rapid succession through her heart; and while her fortitude was sufficient to prevent any outburst of that woe, any ebullition of that harrowing agony, it had the effect, on the other hand, of sending up the hectic hues of excitement to her cheeks, so that her husband, as he glanced with proud satisfaction upon his young wife, while introducing her to Bertram, thought that she had never seemed so beautiful before.

And Bertram Vivian himself, how looked, how felt he? He was now in his twenty-fourth year, a young man of Apollo-like beauty. His hair clustered in raven curls of exceeding richness about that high marble forehead where Genius sat enthroned, his tall slender figure was masculine symmetry itself. But he, too, was deadly pale; yet to the duke's eye was no agitation on his part visible. But how different to the eyes of Eliza! The glance, the one glance, which she had dared throw upon him, made her aware in an instant that he was a prey to a deep, silent, inward agitation, as tremendous and as excruciating as that which she felt herself; and she saw, too, that notwithstanding his air of outward composure, there was something about him almost bordering upon terror which her eye alone could detect. Doubtless he feared lest all in a moment the adamantine bonds of tensely nerved prudence and preterhuman self-control wherewith he and she had fortified themselves should be snapped asunder, as Samson broke the Philistine bonds, and that there might ensue a wild scene of agony, flooding tears, and convulsive sobs, in which they would both be lost. But when Bertram beheld her so completely the mistress of herself, that feeling of terror passed away in an instant, and with a coldly courteous dignity he returned her salutation.

"Bertram, my dear nephew," exclaimed the duke, hastening to embrace him, "welcome to Oaklands! Welcome — doubly welcome — all the more that I have not seen you since that shocking but false report of your loss — But, Eliza dearest, you must at least give my younger nephew as kind a greeting as you bestowed upon the elder one when first you met a year back."

For the duke remembered that when Eliza and Lord Clandon had thus met, she graciously proffered him her hand, giving him at the same time words of welcome. But now to Bertram no hand was stretched forth, no syllable was spoken.

"Welcome to Oaklands, Mr. Vivian," said Eliza, in a voice which he knew to be unnaturally calm, but which struck the duke as only being strangely and unaccountably chilling; at the same time she proffered her hand, which Bertram just held for a moment.

Again had a revulsion of feeling taken place within her, she was again all marble, and it was a hand cold as that of the dead which Bertram thus touched.

"And so, my dear nephew," said the duke, "you only returned from St. Petersburg a few days back? By the bye, how was it that when you came from the United States, last June twelvemonth, you did not take London in your way to see your relatives and your friends, ere proceeding to St. Petersburg?"

"You are aware, uncle," responded Bertram, "that when I obtained leave of absence from my post in America, it was my purpose to pass a few months in England. But on arriving at Liverpool I received an official despatch, announcing that I was appointed first attaché to the embassy at St. Petersburg, and the positive orders were that I was to proceed thither without a moment's delay. I did so."

"Well, well," said the duke, "there is nothing like zeal and obedience in the performance of your duties. The Foreign Office is much pleased with you; and I shall ask that you be appointed envoy to one of the minor courts. It is a proud thing for you, Bertram, to reflect that when only a few months past your twenty-third year you will be an ambassador. Or, if you like to go to Parliament, I can put you in for one of my pocket-boroughs at the next general election."

"My lord, I would much rather leave England again as soon as possible."

"Well, we shall have plenty of time to talk it over, for I mean you to stay a few weeks with us, now that you are here. Your brother, Lord Clandon, is expected in a few days, and we have a select party at Oaklands."

"I should now wish to retire to my chamber," said Bertram. "The roads are dusty — "

"To be sure!" cried the duke; and ringing the bell, he ordered the domestic who answered the summons to show the Honourable Mr. Vivian to his apartment.

"And it is time," said Eliza, after a pause, during which Bertram with a slight bow had quitted the room, "it is time that I should dress for dinner."

In a few minutes the duchess was alone in her boudoir. This meeting with the loved one — the one who was still so dear to her — had been almost more than her fortitude could bear up against. Throughout the ordeal she herself was astounded at her own courage in supporting it; but now that she was alone in her boudoir, her feelings could no longer be restrained. She threw herself upon her knees, her anguish burst forth, the tears gushed in fountains from her eyes, her bosom was convulsed with sobs.

"Oh, father, father!" the voice of insufferable agony went up from her heart, as she thus apostrophized her dead parent, "you knew not the misery you were entailing upon me at the time. But if from the mansions of the other world it be given to the spirits of the departed to look down at what is passing in this, you can now understand it all. May God forgive you, father — even as I have forgiven you."

When she grew somewhat calmer, the Duchess of Marchmont reviewed the details of the meeting which had just passed. While Bertram was answering his uncle's observations, he had spoken with a cold firmness, and without even so much as glancing toward herself; but when he had said that he was anxious to leave England as soon as possible, he had spoken with an emphasis which she could full well understand. Oh, why had he come to Oaklands at all? Wherefore cause them both to run this tremendous risk? Did he suppose that the duke was acquainted with the circumstance of their love? No, it was impossible, for if so, Bertram would not have paid this visit. The natural delicacy of his feelings would have kept him away; but how was it that his pride had not also kept him away? Did he suspect how she had been deceived and sacrificed, or did he fancy that she had wilfully proved faithless to her love for him, and, dazzled by the proffer of a ducal coronet, had bestowed her hand upon his uncle? In all these matters Eliza was in a state of the utmost uncertainty. But could her doubts be cleared up? Must she seek or afford an opportunity for explanations? No, she was resolved not to trust herself alone with Bertram Vivian. Rather, ten thousand times rather, exist even under the weight of his injurious suspicions, if such he entertained, than do aught which might savour of impropriety in her position as a wife, or lead her to even an unfaithful thought or unduteous word with regard to her husband. And that he did entertain those suspicions, she was more than half-afraid; for there was a certain pride, a certain cold assertion of manly dignity, in the way in which he had met her. Why, then, had he come to Oaklands? Was it to upbraid and reproach her? Was it to demand the return of the ring which he had given her, and to restore the one which he had received from herself?

The Duchess of Marchmont saw more than ever the necessity of exerting all her fortitude. She did her best to assume her wonted outward calmness, and she bathed her eyes copiously to efface the evidences of weeping ere she summoned her maids to assist at her toilet. When this toilet was completed, she repaired to the drawing-room, where she found the duke in conversation with the assembled guests; but Bertram was not there. It was not until within a few minutes of the dinner-hour that he made his appearance. How handsome did he look! — but not finely and majestically handsome; it was rather a delicate and intellectual but still masculine beauty which characterized him. There was no colour upon his cheeks, and his glossy dark whiskers threw out the paleness of those cheeks all the more visibly. But the exquisite classic profile, the haughty curl of the upper lip, and the godlike nobility of the alabaster brow, with the raven curls clustering around it, rendered that head a model of sculptural perfection. His movements were slow, yet not sluggish; they were replete with ease and elegance, but they, as well as the expression of his countenance, indicated to observers generally the thoughtfulness of his mind, and to Eliza alone the existence of a deep, ineffable, imperishable sorrow in his heart. His voice was, as it were, clouded from the same cause, but full of a fine masculine harmony; and when, as he glided with ease into the discourse that was progressing as he entered, a smile appeared upon his lips, it was a cold, glacial smile, resembling the light which the sun flings upon ice.

When dinner was announced, it became Bertram's duty — as the last male comer, and likewise as a relative — to escort the duchess to the banqueting-room. It was only with a cold courtesy that he approached her; with the same cold reserve did she bow slightly as she took his arm, but not with more airy lightness sits the butterfly upon the flower than lay the fingers of Eliza upon the arm of Bertram Vivian. As they headed the procession to the banqueting-room, Bertram spoke of the weather, of the beauty of the grounds, and of the most indifferent topics. It was the same as he sat on her right hand at the dinner-table; and when he took wine with her, the bows that were exchanged were the merest and the slightest inclination of the head, without a smile upon either countenance. All was chilling and distant between them. Thus the dinner passed away, and every one, not even excepting the duke himself, had noticed that there was a strange formal reserve, a chilling ceremonial distance, with merely the gloss of well-bred courtesy over all, between the duchess and Bertram Vivian. But of course no remark was verbally made, though covert and stealthy looks of surprise were exchanged. The natural impression was that Bertram, less generous, less magnanimous than his elder brother, looked with ill-disguised discontent and annoyance on the marriage which his uncle had contracted, and that the duchess, perceiving this conduct on his part, resented it in a dignified and becoming manner.

When the ladies had retired, the duke, not wishing to judge his nephew hastily, but at the same time feeling it incumbent upon him to take some little notice, if only by barest allusion, of a tenor of conduct which every one had perceived, motioned him to bring his glass and come and sit next to him. Bertram obeyed with an alacrity which, trifling though the incident were, displayed a most willing obedience, and scarcely was he seated by the duke's side, when he said, in an earnest manner, " Accept my sincerest thanks, dear uncle, for the handsome addition you have so continuously made to my own restricted income. I have endeavoured to render myself worthy of your generosity. And now, scarcely am I beneath your roof when you make me offers of which any young man ought to be proud. I never will, I never can forget your goodness. God forbid that I ever should," and it was with the sudden impulsiveness of a naturally fervid nature that Bertram took his uncle's hand and pressed it warmly in his own.

The duke for an instant gazed upon him in wonderment as he said to himself, " Is it possible that Bertram is a vile hypocrite, that in his heart he detests my marriage, that he is not altogether able to conceal his sentiments from my wife, but that, fearing he has gone too far, he now seeks to propitiate and conciliate me? "

Yet there was nothing in the young man's countenance, nothing in the honest frankness with which his dark clear eyes encountered his uncle's looks, to justify those suspicions. The duke was bewildered, and Bertram went on speaking.

" You asked me," he said, " if I would like to enter Parliament, but I have no wish to remain in England. English habits and tastes do not suit one who has been upwards of three years abroad. Besides," added Bertram, quickly, " my views are entirely cast in the diplomatic sphere, and therein, dear uncle, do I solicit your interest. Believe me, I am in haste to get abroad again, no matter to what part of the world. I deemed it my bounden duty to come to Oaklands to pay my respects to you, to assure your Grace of my gratitude, and to congratulate you on the happiness which you evidently enjoy. "

"Yes, I am happy with my amiable duchess," responded the duke; and once more were his eyes fixed earnestly and scrutinizingly upon Bertram Vivian.

"Report had not failed to waft her manifold good qualities to my ears," he observed, without the slightest change of countenance, "even before I had the honour of meeting her Grace this day."

"And yet methinks, Bertram," said the duke, "you hardly treated her with the friendliness of a relative."

The young man gave no immediate answer; he dropped his kerchief, and deliberately picked it up. This interval of a single moment was sufficient for him to recover complete self-possession.

"Rest assured, uncle," responded Bertram, "that my conduct shall ever be marked with the profoundest respect toward the Duchess of Marchmont — yes, ever!"

The duke bit his lip for a moment. He thought there was something cold and distant in the answer, — something which justified his suspicion that Bertram in his heart hated the match. But yet it was not a reply which would bear any comment on his Grace's part. It might even admit an interpretation which would throw out the delicacy of his nephew's feelings in the most admirable light. What if he considered that respect was the only, or at least the most becoming demeanour which he ought to adopt toward a lady a year younger than himself, and who had merely become connected with him by marriage with a relative? What if he were to consider that anything savouring of a more advanced cordiality might touch upon familiarity, and that such familiarity might be viewed suspiciously by the world? And then, too, Bertram had really so little to gain if the duke had remained unmarried and if he were to die childless. The elder brother, Lord Clandon, would become Duke of Marchmont, he would no doubt marry, he would probably have issue, and Bertram Vivian would gain the empty title of a lord by courtesy, without a peer's rank, and without a single additional farthing to his income.

All these thoughts swept through the mind of the Duke of Marchmont in the space of a few moments, and when he again turned his eyes upon Bertram Vivian, there was so much open-hearted frankness, so much lofty intellectuality, so much true grandeur of the soul depicted upon his faultlessly beautiful countenance, that the duke felt he must have wronged him with his unfavourable suspicions, while, on the other hand, his favourable conjectures to account for his nephew's conduct toward the duchess must, after all, be the right ones. The gentlemen rejoined the ladies in the drawing-room, where coffee was served around. Bertram leaned against the mantelpiece, at a distance from all the rest,—at intervals silent and abstracted, at others falling with well-bred readiness and intellectual ease into the conversation that was going on. He did not once approach the duchess, he never addressed his observations to her; but then, no one could consider this as extraordinary, inasmuch as his remarks were made generally, and not in reply to the previous observations of any particular individual. Still there was a visible restraint on the part of both Bertram and the duchess, for she never once even so much as turned her eyes upon him; and she also had her intervals of silence and abstraction, which never were perceived before. The guests separated to their respective chambers with the conviction that Bertram hated the marriage, and that the duchess fathomed his feeling and properly resented it in the way that a well-bred lady could alone exhibit her offended and indignant pride. The Duke of Marchmont, too, again wavered in his opinion, and was again inclined to think that this was the true reading of the mystery. He therefore said nothing to Eliza on the subject, for fear of wounding her feelings; but he secretly resolved that if these scenes were renewed, Bertram's visit to Oaklands should be cut very speedily short.

On the following morning, at breakfast, there was the same cold constraint, the same distant formality, between the duchess and Bertram Vivian. When the amusements of the day were about to be settled, the duchess proposed a riding-party, amongst other recreations, whereupon Bertram, on being invited by the duke to join it, excused himself on the plea of having letters to write. In the afternoon, when there was to be a boating-party on the splendid piece of ornamental water in the neighbourhood of the mansion, Bertram begged to be excused from joining it, as his physician had recommended horse exercise and he could not dispense with his daily ride. The guests were astonished. He would not ride when they rode, but he now chose to ride when they did not. The dinner was marked by the same sort of conduct, the evening passed in a similar manner, and the effect of all this was to throw a species of damp upon the spirits of the guests. The duke himself now became cold and distant to Bertram, and, not choosing to deign any further discourse with him on the topic, resolved to speak to his wife.

"Eliza," he said, when they had retired to their chamber, "it is impossible I can conceal from myself the strange, I may even call it the rude and uncourteous manner, in which my nephew behaves toward you."

For a moment the duchess trembled from head to foot, but her agitation escaped her husband's notice. Then, almost instantaneously recovering her presence of mind, she said, in her serene, calm voice, "I have nothing to complain of in Mr. Vivian's treatment."

Again was the duke smitten with the thought that his favourable construction must be the true one, — that Bertram was resolved his conduct should be merely respectful, and nothing more, that Eliza understood his meaning, appreciated it, and was not merely satisfied, but pleased. The duke therefore said no more, but he thought within his own heart that this self-imposed restraint would necessarily be mitigated into a little more congenial cordiality in the course of a few days.

The next three or four days, however, passed in precisely the same manner, and it became evident that Bertram absolutely avoided the duchess as much as he possibly could. If, when in the drawing-room, a movement was made by the guests which threatened to leave him alone with Eliza, he would abruptly quit the apartment. He had ceased to conduct her to the dinner-table; he placed himself (and some thought, studiously so) as far from her as possible. He never addressed himself direct to her, unless absolutely obliged, and then his tones were chillingly glacial. Her demeanour, on the other hand, began to grow evidently distressed, notwithstanding all her efforts to maintain a dignified composure. The truth is, it was an ordeal that was wearing her out, she could not support it. All her love for Bertram Vivian was revived with its full pristine power and tenderness. Indeed, it had never been extinguished; it had given place to resignation when she believed him to be no more; it had remained, as it were, lulled and subdued by the strong dominion of self-control during the year which had elapsed since, by the contents of her father's desk, she had discovered that he was alive; and when Bertram himself, in all his living, breathing beauty, again appeared in her presence, that love was inspired with fullest vitality once more. To be with him, to behold him often and often when all the rest thought that her eyes gazed elsewhere, to breathe the same atmosphere, to hear the melting music of his voice, at times pouring forth its eloquence as if in golden tones, to know that she might have been his, after all, if no duplicity and deceit had sacrificed her, and, what was more still, to have the inward conviction that he loved her even now as much as ever he had loved before, — oh, all this constituted an ordeal fraught with anguish that was ineffable, with tortures that were harrowing, with an affliction the poignancy of which was crucifying!

The Duke of Marchmont was bewildered. At one time he thought one thing, at another time another. Now his conjectures were favourable to his nephew, the next moment they became quite the reverse. He felt as if a scene were passing around him which he could not understand, as if there were some strange mystery, to the reading of which he possessed no possible clue. That things could not go on thus, he felt persuaded; but how was he to interfere? How was he to treat with importance a matter which in reality might have no importance at all? If he made up his mind to speak to his nephew, Bertram at once took the initiative of the discourse, but quite on some other subject, and all his expressions were most dutiful and affectionate toward his uncle. Thus the duke would go away from him, leaving unsaid all he had meant to say. If he spoke to his wife when they were alone together, Eliza still declared that there was nothing in Mr. Bertram's conduct of which she had to make the slightest complaint; and she even added, in an unguarded moment, "that it was precisely what it ought to be." The duke put quite a different construction on her words from that which they ought to have borne, and giving her credit for a delicacy of feeling which, though carried to an extreme, was yet in the right direction, he embraced her with all his uxorious fondness.

It was in the midst of these circumstances that Lord Clandon arrived at Oaklands on the promised visit. The brothers had not met since they separated, more than three years back, at that very same mansion, after the death of the late Marquis of Viviandale, — that death which, by altering their father's position at the time, had led to their recall from college. Bertram precipitated himself into Hugh's arms, and if the joy of the latter were less exuberant, it was not considered the less sincere, but merely that it had a different mode of demonstration, the dispositions of the two being not completely alike. Lord Clandon was all cordial courtesy and respectful friendliness toward the duchess; his demeanour appeared to be precisely what it ought from a relative of his age to one of hers. Thus the presence of Lord Clandon at Oaklands threw out, by the effect of contrast, the cold reserve and glacial formality of Bertram into still stronger relief.

Lord Clandon had not been half an hour on this occasion at the mansion before he observed his brother's conduct toward the duchess. At first he himself was as much astonished as the rest, for he had not the remotest suspicion of anything that had taken place between Bertram and Eliza when she was Miss Lacey at Oxford. Neither did he conceive it possible that his brother loved the duchess; for if so, Clandon thought that Bertram would pursue quite a different course and would seek to render himself as agreeable as possible. There was a mystery to be cleared up, and Hugh resolved to penetrate it. But how? He threw himself in Bertram's way, walked out alone with him, turned the conversation on the duchess, and endeavoured to draw his brother out. But not the slightest syllable of explanation was volunteered. Lord Clandon accordingly saw that he must go upon some other tack. He watched his brother's and Eliza's demeanour toward each other for the next two days; still all was mystery. Then he bethought himself of a plan to arrive at its solution.

" My dear Mrs. Bailey," he said to this lady, one morning courteously offering her his arm to escort her for a walk through the grounds after breakfast, " have you observed nothing? "

" Observed what, my lord? " inquired the antiquated votary of fashion, — " that the eldest Miss Lomax's hair is red, though it passes in a complimentary way for auburn, that Miss Rachel Lomax has freckles, and that Miss

Mary drank three glasses of champagne yesterday at dinner?"

"No, nothing of all that," answered Lord Clandon. "You are a relation of my amiable, beautiful, and accomplished young aunt — "

"To be sure I am!" said the old lady, proudly. "It was at my house, your lordship is aware, that his Grace first met Eliza and became enamoured of her."

"I know it," rejoined Clandon. "And being the duchess's relation, you are of course in her confidence?"

"Ah, there you are wrong, my lord!" exclaimed Mrs. Bailey. "It is this which pains me. Eliza never consults me in anything. Even her very orders to her milliner are given without the least deference to my opinion, and though certainly everything becomes her — "

"Well, then, my dear Mrs. Bailey," continued Hugh, "if you are not in her Grace's confidence, you ought to be. Yes, you ought to be," he added, still more emphatically, "for there is something going on which no one can understand."

"It certainly struck me," said the old lady, "that the Honourable George Curzon is paying his addresses to Mary Lomax, but really I do not see that her Grace can interfere. Of course the young man's intentions are honourable — "

"My dear Mrs. Bailey," interrupted Lord Clandon, "it is not this that I mean. A lady of your shrewdness, experience, and penetration," he went on to say, in order to flatter the dame and win her over to his purpose, "a lady of your tact and judgment — "

"I flatter myself that I am not deficient in all that," observed Mrs. Bailey, with a proud elevation of the head, "for I was the first to detect that the turtle-soup was burned yesterday, and that there was no cayenne in the vermicelli."

"Then with such penetration, my dear Mrs. Bailey," quickly resumed his lordship, "you cannot possibly have failed to notice the extraordinary conduct of my brother Bertram toward the duchess — and I might add, her equally extraordinary conduct toward him. I consult you as a relation of the duchess, as her best and sincerest friend; and if there is anything to be done to bridge the gulf which evidently separates my brother from her Grace, if there be anything that can place them on a more cordial footing, pray make use of my services."

" Well, my lord," said Mrs. Bailey, delighted and flattered at being thought of so much importance as to be consulted in the matter, " there is something, you know — or, rather, you do not know, for it is a profound secret. The late Captain Lacey imparted it to me, strictly enjoining me, however, not to divulge it. But as you have expressed yourself in such kind, such generous, such admirable terms, I think it would really be wrong for me not to take you into my confidence."

" My dear Mrs. Bailey, rest assured that I shall not abuse it; " and Hugh spoke with the ill-repressed eagerness of one who hovers in suspense on the threshold of a mystery's solution.

" Well, I will trust you," said Mrs. Bailey, who was as frivolous as she was vain and selfish. " The fact is, Bertram and Eliza were acquainted at Oxford. They loved each other madly; they separated with an exchange of rings. I don't know whether they have them still, but I do recollect that Eliza wore hers very frequently up to the day of her marriage, but never since. Well, the report reached England of Bertram's death, and shortly afterward Captain Lacey and his daughter removed to London to live with me. In due time the captain received a letter from Bertram, expressing a hope that if the report of his death which was published in the English papers had come to his knowledge, the contradiction had likewise been seen. This, however, had escaped the captain's notice. Well, Eliza was beginning to be admired in my saloons, and though the duke had not as yet seen her, there was every prospect of her forming some brilliant alliance. So I of course gave my advice on the subject, and of course Captain Lacey followed it. ' Bertram Vivian,' said I, ' is the mere cadet of a junior branch of a great family, and Eliza, with her beauty, can look much higher. Depend upon it, she will marry a peer of the realm. Keep this letter secret. Now that she is resigned to the belief of her lover's death, it is a pity to disturb that feeling. At all events, let her continue in ignorance of Bertram's miraculous escape until we see whether she cannot form a better match.' Captain Lacey thought my counsel good, and adopted it."

" And therefore," observed Lord Clandon, " Eliza married the duke in the belief that Bertram was no more? "

" Precisely so," answered Mrs. Bailey. " But I can assure you that for the last month or so both her father and myself were dreadfully nervous and uneasy — I mean the last month previous to the wedding. For a second letter came from Bertram. It was addressed to the captain at Oxford, as the former one was, and was sent on by the postmaster, with whom he had left an intimation whither his letters were to be forwarded."

"Yes, to be sure; quite prudent," interjected Lord Clandon. "But that second letter — "

"It came to say that Bertram's love was as strong as ever," continued Mrs. Bailey; "that the two years' test imposed by Captain Lacey had nearly expired, and that close upon the heels of the letter itself, Bertram was coming by the next ship to claim Eliza as his bride. Well, I certainly had some little difficulty in preventing the captain from revealing everything to his daughter, but he was soon argued out of his foolishness, and so the match took place with the duke, your uncle."

"And did you hear anything more of Bertram? Did he call in Grosvenor Square when he visited England?" inquired Lord Clandon.

"No, nothing of the sort," answered Mrs. Bailey, "and I was very glad of it. Why should I have borne the brunt of his wild ravings? I suppose he saw the account of the marriage in the newspapers, and so the tale was told. It is very unfortunate he should have taken it into his head to come to Oaklands. For my part, I think he had better have stayed away. However, it is impossible, considering all things, that he and the duchess can behave to each other in a different way than what they do; and since he has chosen to come hither, I think their conduct is highly creditable to both. What I fear is that it may lead to some suspicion on the duke's part — "

"You believe, then," interrupted Lord Clandon, "that my uncle is totally ignorant of the former acquaintance and of the love between Eliza and Bertram?"

"Oh, I am certain of it," exclaimed Mrs. Bailey. "Eliza positively assured her father, within an hour after the wedding, that never from her lips should her husband hear of the past, nor from her conduct be led to suspect that her heart was not his. And now, my lord, that I have told you the secret, what course do you consider it prudent to suggest?"

"These revelations, my dear Mrs. Bailey," responded Hugh, "have come upon me with such startling suddenness that I am unable in a moment to proffer an opinion. I will tell you in a few days what I think ought to be done. Perhaps I may speak privately to my brother, worm out of him the history of his love, and then advise him to absent himself from a place where his presence is dangerous."

"In any case, my lord, do not compromise me," said Mrs. Bailey. "The Honourable Mr. Bertram Vivian is civil and polite enough to me, — for of course he cannot suspect that I had anything to do in leading Eliza to jilt him, — and I do not want to be brought into collision with anybody."

"Rest assured, my dear Mrs. Bailey," rejoined Lord Clandon, "that I will manage the matter with as much tact and delicacy as if it were you yourself who had the conduct of it."

"I rely upon your lordship," said the foolish woman, who did not reflect that she had been avowing to the very individual most interested in the duke's remaining unmarried the schemes and stratagems to which she had been a party in order to bring about that alliance between his Grace and Eliza.

Having escorted Mrs. Bailey back to the mansion, Lord Clandon sauntered forth again into the grounds, to reflect upon all that he had just heard. Presently he beheld his uncle approaching along a shady avenue, accompanied by a large favourite bull-mastiff answering to the name of Pluto. His Grace was walking slowly, with the air of one in deep preoccupation. The mystery of the scene which was constantly before his eyes was bewildering him more and more, and he saw no issue thence by any feasible means.

"Ah, my dear uncle!" said Clandon. "What, walking alone? Where are all the guests?"

"The Lomaxes are getting ready for departure," responded the duke. "In fact, I don't wonder that they should have abridged their visit — "

Then stopping short, he suddenly stooped down to caress his dog, in order to hide his vexation.

"What mean you, my dear uncle?" inquired Clandon, as if with an air of perfect surprise.

"I mean, Hugh," responded the duke, suddenly turning his looks fixedly upon his nephew's countenance, "that there is something going on which I cannot comprehend. I must speak out; I am glad that accident has thus thrown you and me together at this moment. There is something in my heart that I burn to unbosom to a confidant. You love me, Hugh; you have testified the noblest and most disinterested attachment — I wish to God I could say the same of your brother."

"What, my lord!" ejaculated Clandon, "has Bertram been wanting in love and respect toward your Grace, the head of the family, our benefactor, our uncle —"

"Hugh," interrupted the Duke of Marchmont, "it is impossible you could have remained blind to all that is going on. Bertram treats the duchess with downright insult. At first his conduct was merely a cold reserve, on which the best interpretations might be put. But now he has been nearly ten days here, and instead of getting on a more friendly footing, he behaves with ill-concealed aversion. The duchess, all amiability herself, will not admit that it is so; she cannot see through it. But I can blind myself no longer, Hugh. I have endeavoured in my own mind to make every possible allowance for Bertram, and all in vain. It is the blackest ingratitude on his part, and I am determined not to put up with it."

"But, my dear uncle," said Lord Clandon, with a conciliatory tone and manner, "pray do not judge hastily, pray do not visit your displeasure upon my brother. You have been pleased to signify that my conduct is worthy of your approval; as a favour therefore for myself, I entreat your Grace to be lenient toward poor Bertram."

"This intercession on your brother's behalf, Hugh, does you infinite credit," rejoined the Duke of Marchmont. "But such conduct is intolerable. It is not merely insulting to the duchess, insulting to myself, but insulting likewise to all the guests. A damp has been thrown upon the spirits of a circle which I gathered about me for purposes of gaiety."

"Would you, my dear uncle, permit me to offer a suggestion?" asked Lord Clandon, in a mild and submissive manner.

"To be sure, Hugh," responded the duke. "Speak. I am glad that your own magnanimous conduct enables me to treat you as a confidant. In a word, do you not think that your brother is chafed at this marriage of mine, and that he is venting his spite upon the duchess?"

"No, uncle," ejaculated Lord Clandon, with the emphasis of conviction, "I am certain that it is not so. Bertram is too generous-hearted, too magnanimous to entertain any such mean and paltry feelings. I, who know my brother's disposition well, can read the clue to the whole mystery."

"Can you?" exclaimed the duke, full of delight and suspense. "Then, what is it? But take care, my dear nephew," he added, more gravely, "how you suffer your love for your brother to blind your eyes to the real truth."

"Listen, uncle, and judge for yourself," responded Lord Clandon. "My brother is a young man naturally diffident, naturally afraid, also, of having his actions wrongly judged. He was ever like this. His very sensitiveness throws him into extremes; the delicacy of his sentiments sometimes renders his conduct seemingly outrageous. He doubtless trembles lest the slightest attention paid to his amiable young relative should be wrongly construed —"

"Well, but those are the very conjectures with which I myself," interrupted the duke, with an air of disappointment, "have sought to account for his conduct, but I fear that they are not the correct ones."

"Bear with me, uncle," said Hugh, deferentially, "and grant me your patience. My brother is two years younger than myself, and though he has seen more of the world in the shape of travel, he knows less of it in useful experience. Regard his position, — a young man of a little more than three and twenty, suddenly presented to a lady relative, even younger than himself. He feels that it is not for him, but for her, to define the degree of friendly intimacy and becoming cordiality on which they are to stand toward each other. Doubtless as he found her ladyship, so has he modelled his own conduct."

"Indeed, Hugh," observed the duke, as he slowly retrospected over all the details of his wife's and Bertram's bearing toward each other, "I think you are right. And now I remember, the very first moment he made his appearance at Oaklands, Eliza did not receive him with a befitting welcome. Yes, there is much truth in your words. She neither gave him her hand nor spoke a single syllable, till I prompted her to do both. I fear me that Eliza was to blame after all."

"You see therefore, dear uncle, that Bertram has measured his own demeanour by that of the duchess. Her Grace received him frigidly, as you have just explained to me. Now, Bertram has his pride as well as his sensitiveness — "

"I understand it all," exclaimed the duke. "Idiot that I was, not to comprehend it before. Of course, it was natural enough. Bertram thought himself slighted. He came with enthusiastic feelings of kindness toward us both, and at the very first instant of his encounter with the duchess, those feelings were chilled within him. After so cold a reception, it was clearly for her, as the mistress of the mansion, to make amends by the increasing cordiality of her demeanour. She has been cold, she has been inhospitable, and Bertram's sensitiveness has shrunk from so much glacial reserve. Truly, Eliza has been to blame, and poor Bertram is to be pitied. I will go at once and speak my mind to the duchess."

"Not so, dear uncle," exclaimed Lord Clandon, holding the duke back. "You have condescended to listen to my mode of reading the mystery — "

"You are as clear-headed, Hugh, as you are generous-hearted," cried the duke. "Proceed! I will be guided by your counsel."

"If I were you," continued Clandon, "I would say nothing to the duchess in the form of upbraiding; I would not even suffer her Grace to perceive that you understand the reason of Bertram's conduct, or that you attribute it to a prideful sensitiveness at her Grace's coldness. But this is what I would do: I would take opportunities to throw her Grace and Bertram more together, so that while the former will be forced to unbend, the latter will be compelled to take such unbending as an atonement for past inhospitality. It were a pity that there should be any differences in a family within the circle of which all the elements of happiness and good-fellowship are comprised."

"Right, my dear nephew," exclaimed the duke; "your counsel is admirable, and it shall be adopted. I will go at once and see what can be done. By the bye, the Lomaxes are about to take their departure; let us hasten to bid them farewell."

The duke and Lord Clandon accordingly retraced their way toward the mansion, which they reached just as Sir William Lomax's travelling chariot drove around to the front entrance. The duchess and the other guests, including Bertram, came forth from the hall to see the Lomaxes off, and the farewells being said, the chariot drove away with Sir William and his family. Those who remained behind lingered upon the steps in conversation for a little while, when the duke abruptly said, " I forgot to tell you all that the new fountain has commenced playing this morning at the end of the lower terrace. Come, let us go and witness it. Clandon, give your arm to Miss Anstruther; Bertram, take you charge of the duchess; Mrs. Bailey, permit me to be your escort."

Bertram Vivian could not possibly refuse an injunction so positively delivered; Eliza, on the other hand, could not decline the offer of his arm. The duke flung a quick glance of satisfied triumph at his elder nephew, as much as to bid him observe how dexterously he had taken the first step in following his counsel, and the procession of ladies and gentlemen, consisting of pairs, moved away from the mansion.

The feather rests not more lightly upon the ground from which the slightest breath of the zephyr may lift it, than did Eliza's hand on the arm of Bertram Vivian. They led the way toward the fountain, and Bertram's conversation was confined to topics of the veriest indifference, Eliza only answering in monosyllables. The fountain was reached; it was flinging up its jet of water high into the air, and opinions of approval were generally pronounced.

" Now," said the duke, " let us ramble without restraint about the grounds. The weather is too charmingly fine not to be taken advantage of. Bertram, I do not think you have seen the grapery, and I recollect that the duchess was speaking of it this morning. You go thither. Mrs. Bailey, I promised to show you my golden pheasants; they are in this direction."

The party, consisting of pairs, as already said, separated from the vicinage of the fountain, and thus broke up as it were, each couple sauntering into the path which struck the fancy at the moment, — all but Bertram and Eliza, and they remained riveted near the fountain, each a prey to a deep inward agitation.

But they were now alone together.

CHAPTER VI

BERTRAM AND ELIZA

ALONE together, for the first time since they had thus met at Oaklands, — alone for the first time since they parted three years and some months back, in the little parlour at Oxford. Alone together! dangerous position, and, oh, how embarrassing, how full of ineffable feelings too, for those who had loved so tenderly and so well!

The duchess was marble-pale, but on Bertram's cheeks there was the hectic flush of excitement, — not a flush gradually dying off into the surrounding whiteness of the skin, but a deep red spot upon either cheek-bone, as if consumption's illusive dyes were glowing there. A false, unnatural fire burned in his eyes; it was evident that he felt like a man who had just reached some crisis which had been foreseen, which he had known must come, but yet, when it did arrive, found him utterly unprepared to meet it. He trembled with agitation; he could no longer repress his feelings. A glance over either shoulder showed him that the last couples of the party were disappearing in the shady avenues, and there he was, alone with her whose image was indelibly impressed upon his heart, whose love had been alike his Elysian joy and his ineffable misery.

Several minutes passed, and there they stood, — Eliza seeming to have her looks fixed upon the fountain, but in reality beholding nothing, Bertram now contemplating her with the strong excitement of feelings too long pent up to be repressible any longer.

" Eliza," he said at length, and that word, that name, was alone thrown out at the time from his lips. It was followed by nought beside, and yet he felt that he had a million things of which to disburden his oppressed spirit.

And that name, when spoken by his lips, thrilled with galvanic effect through her entire form. Never had she thought that her own name was beautiful until she had first heard it pronounced by his tongue. And his voice, too, had all those melting cadences, all that clouded harmony of sadness, which is so perfectly but dangerously calculated to stir up the tenderest emotions of the soul.

"Eliza," he repeated, after a long pause, during which he had gazed on her with mingled rapture and despair, "at length we are alone together."

"And we ought not to be alone together," she answered, in a voice which would have been inaudible were it not for its natural clearness, and now her cheeks were suddenly mantled in blushes.

"Wherefore should we not be alone?" asked Bertram, bitterly. "Is it that your conscience tells you I have come as an accuser, and that you are afraid to look your accuser in the face?"

"No, Mr. Vivian," said the duchess, proudly, as she raised her eyes and fixed them on him for a few moments; then they were suddenly bent downward again, and the pearly tears gushed forth. "I see," she added, again in a voice scarcely audible, "that you believe me guilty of the foulest, vilest, most dishonourable perfidy. But it was not so — No, Bertram, it was not so."

"What, Eliza?" he ejaculated, in amazement. "What is this that I hear?" Then the next moment he added, with scornful bitterness, "But you are heaping insult upon injury to treat me as a poor credulous fool."

"Bertram," answered the duchess, in a voice that was low but clear, and again raising her eyes toward his countenance, on which she gazed with the steadiness of innocence in her looks, "as I have a soul to be saved, as there is an Almighty who hears my words now, and will punish me hereafter if I wilfully deceive you, I was not guilty."

"Eliza," said Bertram, suddenly seized with the wild excitement of rage, fury, and indignation, and again his eyes flashed forth unnatural fires, "if you were deceived, maledictions, ten thousand, thousand maledictions upon the heads of those — "

"Cease!" almost shrieked forth the horrified duchess, her countenance expressing ineffable agony. "You would invoke curses upon the head of my perished father."

"My God, I comprehend it all!" murmured Bertram, and he placed his hand upon his throbbing brows, as if thereby to steady the brain that rocked and reeled within.

"Yes," continued Eliza, now hurried away by the strong impulse which opportunity as well as her own feelings gave her to justify herself, "I was deceived, Bertram, cruelly deceived. God, who alone can read the human heart, knows how true I was to you, and if an angel-witness were to appear before you now, that holy being could tell how I cherished your image while you were absent, how I cherished it even after the terrible report that you had gone down to a grave in the deep waters. Bertram, it was not until I became another's that I learned the tremendous truth that you were alive."

"Eliza, Eliza! this is agony for me to hear," murmured the wretched Bertram, his countenance filled with despair. "I wrote to your father twice — "

"I know it," she interrupted him softly, but, oh, with what a world of ineffable feeling in her looks: "I know it. My father deceived me — But spare him, spare his memory. May God have forgiven him!"

"Eliza," continued Bertram, "I believe you. There is truth in your looks, truth in your words. I always believed you truthful, until the fatal day when, on arriving in England to hasten and claim you as my bride, I read in a newspaper the report of your marriage. Just Heaven! what searing, blinding, sight-blasting words for me. Do you know, Eliza, that for hours I was like one gone mad, — that I strove to lay violent hands upon myself, and that the persons of the hotel prevented me?"

"Bertram, Bertram, tell me not all this," moaned Eliza, sobbing bitterly. "It is more than I can endure. Since the first instant that the intelligence of your death reached me, my life has been one long agony, one continuous throe of indescribable despair. The rack may torture for hours or for days, and the miseries of the victim will end in death, but my rack, Bertram, has now lasted for more than two long years, and it will last, Bertram, until I go down into the cold grave where alone this heart of mine can be at peace."

"Eliza, it is now for me to implore you to be calm, to entreat that you will not talk to me in this distracting, frightful way," and Bertram, falling on his knees upon the stone margin of the fountain's reservoir, took her hand and pressed it to his lips, but the next instant dropping it — nay, more, even tossing it away from him — he started up, exclaiming in violent excitement, "That hand is another's. It is sacrilege in me to touch it."

Eliza's tears fell fast and bitterly. She would not have withdrawn her hand of her own accord, — at least not so abruptly as he had flung it from him. She was shocked, she was hurt, she was wounded; the affliction which that poor creature endured in those rending moments was such as no man, even the most vindictive, could wish his mortal enemy to undergo.

"Pardon me, Eliza," said Bertram, in a tone of tenderest contrition; "I was rude — I was brutal. But, heavens! I am not the master of myself," and again he pressed his feverish hand to his wildly throbbing brows. "Let me say a few words of explanation," he resumed, after awhile, and speaking in a more collected manner. "By a miracle — or by almost one — I was rescued from a watery grave in the depths of the Potomac. I knew that the report of an accident in which so many lives were lost — indeed all save one — would be copied from the American into the English newspapers, and when recovered from the almost fatal illness of many weeks into which the shock and horror of the calamity plunged me, I lost no time in writing to your father. Not a doubt was in my mind but that your fears would have been relieved as to myself, long before that letter could reach England, but if not, it was beyond the power of human conception to suppose that your father would keep you in that dark, dreadful belief of my death. Oh, Eliza, how I counted the months, the weeks, the days, the hours, that were to elapse ere I beheld you again! Oh, how I cherished your image! Never man loved as I loved — never, never."

He turned abruptly aside, and his convulsive sobbings smote upon Eliza's ears, striking her very brain as if with a succession of heaviest blows, impaling her heart upon the stake of indescribable agony. And yet she dared not stretch out a hand to touch him, to awaken him as it were from that nightmare of hideous woe. She remembered that she was a wife, and though the very thought was crucifixion, it was nevertheless one which she must endure.

"Yes, Eliza," continued Bertram, when after a short space he grew calmer, "no man ever loved as I loved. At length I reached England," he continued, abruptly taking up the thread of his narrative, "joy, ineffable joy in my heart. Behold yon butterfly sipping the honey from the flower on which it has settled. Thus did my soul rest on the delicious sweets of its own reflections; thus did my spirit repose in delight upon the roseate tints of love, the fairest flower of the human heart. But what if a rude hand were abruptly stretched forth to clutch that poor butterfly, and, stripping off its wings, were to toss it, still alive, on that parterre, to writhe out the rest of its existence in agonies, never more to sip the sweets of the flower from which it was taken? But thus was it with me; thus was it with the soul that lives in this breast."

And as Bertram spoke, he beat his clenched fist violently upon his chest.

"You will drive me mad," murmured Eliza, who seemed as if she were about to faint.

"Heaven forgive me," cried Bertram, "for torturing you thus, but I cannot check this outpouring of my feelings. The burden of my sufferings is too great, Eliza, for my soul to bear. I have but a few words more to say, and I entreat you to hear them. I was at Liverpool when I read the account of your marriage in the paper, — a marriage with my own uncle. What could I think, but that you were faithless to me? When reason returned, I wrote to the government, entreating to be at once appointed to a post in another embassy, for I had resigned my situation in that at Washington. My request was promptly acceded to; I was nominated to the embassy at St. Petersburg. Thither I sped without delay. Never did man travel so fast. It was the mad endeavour to outstrip my thoughts, to distance, so to speak, the agonies which, like pursuing fiends or ravenous wolves, were upon my track. At length I was ordered home to England with important despatches. I arrived, as you are aware, but a few days back, and I said to myself, 'I will see her once more. Such perfidy as hers, in return for so much love, must not go unreproached. Whatever the risk be, I will see her.' And there was another reason too, Eliza:

it was that I purposed to give back your ring, and to demand mine."

"Take back your ring, Bertram," said Eliza, in a low, tremulous voice, and now it seemed to her that she was about to sever the very last feeble tie which in any way connected her with an Elysian past, and as she spoke, she slowly drew forth the ring from her bosom.

"Ah," ejaculated Bertram Vivian, a wild joy flashing suddenly in his eyes, "you have kept it there, next to your heart. Oh, then, Eliza, you have not ceased to love me, even when becoming another's?"

"Bid the flower divest itself of its fragrance, bid the green plant put off its verdure of its own accord," she answered, solemnly, "and it is commanding impossibilities. Bid the waters of that fountain cease to well upward while the motive power is there, and it were also commanding what cannot be done. Think not therefore that my heart could put away that love which has become as inseparable from it in life as the fragrance is from the flower or the verdure from the plant while the warm season lasts. Think not either that it is in my power to still the feelings which rise upward from the hidden springs of my soul."

There was a holy solemnity, a sanctified pathos, in Eliza's tone as she thus spoke, and as her words ceased, she proffered the ring which she had drawn forth from her bosom.

"No, Eliza, no," exclaimed Bertram, with renewed excitement. "I will not take it back. Whatever henceforth we may be to each other, and that perhaps is as nothing," he added, bitterly, "still, still shall you retain the pledge of my love, as I will keep the pledge of yours. There can be no sin in this."

"I will keep it, Bertram," answered the duchess, after a few moments' hesitation, and she consigned the ring back to its resting-place next her heart.

"Oh, but if all this be possible," abruptly exclaimed Bertram Vivian, as fresh ideas came sweeping through his mind, but replete with newly awakened suspicion and mistrust, all the force and anguish of which were at the same instant reflected in his countenance, "how was it, Eliza, that you bestowed your hand upon mine own uncle? Did it not strike you that there was something to shock the purity of the feelings — "

"Accuse me not, Bertram," interrupted Eliza, with a look full of candid yet mournful ingenuousness. "There is not a question you can put to me which I am not prepared to answer. And I will answer every one frankly and truthfully. Oh, if this were not my purpose, I might shield myself in dissimulations of all kinds — I might affect offended pride and indignant innocence at being thus questioned. But as my soul is guileless, it needs not such artifices wherein to take refuge. Bertram," continued the young lady, with an expression of ineffable woe upon her countenance and anguish in her tones, "you know not all the arts that were adopted to enmesh me in this web which is inextricable. God forgive me that I should thus have to allude to my own father, but it is so. As I have a soul to be saved, I knew not that my husband was your uncle until the knowledge came too late. Never had I heard that the Marquisate of Viviandale had been changed into the Dukedom of Marchmont — "

"One word, Eliza," ejaculated Bertram, who during the first portion of her speech had become all confidence and trustfulness in her sincerity, but in whose heart the reptile of suspicion suddenly lifted up its head again; "is it possible that during the months of courtship my uncle never once alluded to myself?"

"Never once," responded Eliza, emphatically. "He never spoke of his relations, much less named them. And my father was careful that the name of Vivian should never be mentioned in my hearing, in connection with the Duke of Marchmont. Are you not aware that the nuptials were private?"

"Ah, private, I understand," ejaculated Bertram bitterly; "the better to exclude the members of the family. But as you have mentioned the nuptials, Eliza," he went on to say, and now his eyes were riveted upon her with all the scrutinizing keenness of fresh suspicion, fresh distrust, "when the minister was performing the ceremony, did he not ask you if you would take John Ferdinand Henry Vivian, Duke of Marchmont, as your husband? And you said yes."

"Bertram," responded Eliza, steadily meeting his gaze with looks that were all ingenuous sadness and mournful innocence, "that marriage ceremony was to me a dream at the time; it appears to me a dream now. I beheld everything through a mist, and if I look back upon it from the present moment, it still appears a something shrouded in obscurity and gloom. Yes, it was a dream,—a waking dream, in which I slumbered with my eyes open. I beheld nought, I heard nought, I felt nought. No, I felt not even when the marriage-ring was placed upon my finger, and if I responded yes to the question that was put to me, it was either mechanically, or else because there was some one nigh to whisper the word in my ear. Had the name of him whom I was taking as a husband been that of Lucifer himself, I should not have heard it, I should not have perceived it in that paralysis of the senses; I should have unconsciously become the bride of Satan. Oh, Bertram, it is not the least cruel of all the phases of the ordeal of torture through which my lorn and desolate existence has been dragged,—it is not the least cruel, I say, that I am compelled to give these explanations, these self-vindications now."

"Oh, wretch that I am, it is I who torture you," exclaimed Bertram, literally shivering from head to foot in the wildness of his excitement and the frenzy of his feelings. "I who love you so madly am torturing you thus horribly. But again I declare to you, Eliza, that I am not master of myself. God knows I strive to look upon the world in the same light that I used to regard it, as one of sunshine and of flowers, but the sunshine turns into a dark, noisome mist enveloping me in a pestilential haze, the flowers, so beautiful to the eye, appear to exhale poisons, and methinks that if I stretch forth my hand to pluck one, a reptile would start forth from amidst the foliage and fix its venomed fangs upon my flesh. Yes, everything is changed to me. The world appears to be made up of deceits, with a gloss over all; the parterres of roses are but hidden pitfalls for the feet. Is it not dreadful, Eliza, that one so young as I should have his heart thus seared, thus warped, thus devastated, so that everything I behold or reflect upon is viewed with suspicion and mistrust?"

"It is dreadful, dreadful, Bertram," murmured the unhappy young lady, quivering from head to foot. "But for Heaven's sake, talk no more thus!"

"What would you have me talk of?" cried Bertram, with increasing bitterness. "Would you have me speak of happiness? It is gone for ever. Of hope? There is none for me. What inducement have I to prosecute a career which would have led me on to fame and fortune? She on whose brow it would have been the proudest moment of my life to place the laurels won by intellect, or the coronet to be gained in the service of my country, has become another's. Ah, Eliza," he ejaculated abruptly, as a fresh suspicion flashed to his mind, " you said just now that you had some knowledge of those letters which I wrote to your father — "

" I found them in his desk after his decease," interrupted the duchess. " Then — and not till then — did I learn that you were alive. Then, too, — and not till then, — did I learn that I might have been yours. No mortal eyes, Bertram, beheld my rending anguish on that occasion. But God saw it, and believe me, that never did the heart of woman throb with such throes, never did human eyes shed such tears, never did living creature kneel for awhile in such profound dark, unutterable despair. And yet there was one thing, Bertram, for which I thanked God, and only one thing. It was that you had not perished in the deep waters, that your young life had not been snatched away."

" Would to Heaven that I had so died, Eliza! " ejaculated Bertram, bitterly. " But those letters of mine, those two letters, did your father leave them that you might become acquainted with his guilt? "

" No," she responded. " Perhaps you have been told that he died suddenly, that he was stricken down all in an instant — "

" Ay, as if by the blasting lightning," interjected Bertram, with a fierce, sardonic bitterness. " Perhaps there was Heaven's retribution in that."

" Spare me, spare me," moaned the wretched Eliza, clasping her hands in agony. " Remember that it is to the daughter of that departed father you are now speaking."

" God help me, Eliza! " exclaimed Bertram, once more pressing his hand to his brow, and staggering back a few paces; " I tell you that I am going mad. But those letters, wherefore had he not destroyed them? "

" It is a mystery which I cannot explain," replied the duchess, in a low, murmuring voice. " Perhaps an unknown, an unaccountable influence led him to preserve them; or perhaps it was an oversight — "

" No, no, Eliza," ejaculated Vivian, with feverish quickness. " It was no oversight, it was the all-powerful, unseen, unknown, but irresistible influence of which you have spoken. The finger of Heaven was in it. It was decreed that the evidences of my constancy, my fidelity, my unperished and imperishable love, should survive your father, that those evidences should not constitute a secret to die with him, but that they should exist to meet your eyes, and convince you that Bertram Vivian was true to his plight."

"And do you still mean to reproach me?" asked Eliza, in tones that were scarcely audible, while the tears rained down her cheeks. "It is cruel, Bertram, it is unkind, after all the explanations I have given you. Methought that you were ere now satisfied of — of — my own imperishable love, when you saw that I carried your ring next to my heart?"

"Eliza, I have wronged you," exclaimed Vivian, who throughout this long and painful interview had been moved by a thousand different and conflicting impulses. "Pardon — forgive me. My conduct has not only been unkind; it is brutal, cowardly, base. You have been a victim — I see it all. May Heaven have mercy upon us both!"

"And now, Bertram," asked Eliza, at length coming to the question which she had foreseen must be put, "what is to be done? How will you act?"

"What mean you?" he demanded, abruptly, a wild joy flashing in his eyes. "Would you —"

"Bertram, Bertram," almost shrieked forth Eliza, as she read what was passing in his mind. "No, there is one sacrifice I cannot make for you, and this is the sacrifice of my duty to my husband. I would lay down my life for you, but not for worlds would I prove faithless to the vows of duty, constancy, and obedience which I pledged to him whose name I bear."

"Eliza, forgive me, pardon me, I beseech you," said Bertram, in a tone and with a look of deepest, most humiliating contrition. "If for an instant I yielded to the wild, the thrilling, the impossible hope which flashed to my mind, it was not that I could deliberately insult the purity of your character. No, no! Heaven forbid that I should prove a villain, that I should brand myself as a wretch — No, no, I will not."

He seized the hand of the duchess as he thus enthusiastically spoke, and pressed it with convulsive violence.

"Bertram," she said, in a low, soft voice, as she gently disengaged her hand, " again I ask you what you will do, now that the interview which was inevitable has taken place? You must not remain here."

" And I cannot leave all in a moment," quickly responded Vivian. " Take my arm, let us slowly return to the mansion. For a few days, Eliza, must I linger here; it would excite the strangest thoughts if I were to depart precipitately."

" And I have been half-afraid, Bertram," murmured the duchess, " that strange thoughts have already been excited by your demeanour toward me."

" Oh, I have been half-mad," he ejaculated. " I have known not what to do. When coldest and most distant toward you, when, believing you wilfully faithless, I have been pointedly frigid and reserved in my manner, my heart was in reality bursting. I could have thrown myself at your feet, imploring your pardon, I could have cried out in the strong voice of my agony, I could have melted into tears and wept like a child. But you ask me what I will do? I will remain yet a few days, until the duke shall have procured for me the promised diplomatic situation in some far-off land, — the farther off, the better, and then, Eliza, we will part — to meet no more."

The duchess gave no response. She took Vivian's arm, and they walked on together through a shady avenue toward the house. She would fain have urged his prompt departure; she trembled lest, after this interview, there should be a change in their demeanour toward each other, so marked and pointed as to excite attention. But how could she express a wish to hurry him away? How could she utter the word which was to make him precipitate the moment when he would bid farewell to her for ever? She could not, she had not the heart to do so; while, on the other hand, she felt so firm in the rectitude of her own principles, so strong in the sense of that duty which she owed to her husband, that she did not even insult herself by thinking of the necessity of avoiding temptation.

They entered the mansion, and Eliza at once retired to her own boudoir, there to reflect, in solitude and without restraint, upon all that had taken place, and there, perhaps, to weep likewise over her sad, sad lot which might have been so different.

CHAPTER VII

THE SHADY AVENUE

That evening, when a domestic entered the drawing-room to announce that dinner was served up, Bertram hastened forward to escort the Duchess of Marchmont to the banqueting-room — an act of courtesy which for some days he had ceased to perform. And now, too, it was all the more marked, inasmuch as it was the place of his elder brother, Lord Clandon, to perform that ceremonial office. But the duke was pleased when he beheld the incident, and he flung a significant look upon Lord Clandon, as much as to bid him observe that the duchess and Bertram were already getting upon a little more friendly footing, so that the elements of discord might be expected soon to disappear from the bosom of the family.

Bertram sat next to the duchess at dinner, and though a complete change had taken place in his mind toward her, though he now regarded her as a victim who still loved him, and not as a wilfully faithless one who had ceased to love, he had a sufficient power of self-control not to show by his conduct any abrupt alteration in his feelings. He was now, to all outward appearance, courteously polite, and nothing more, — courteously polite and profoundly respectful. Still that politeness — evidencing itself in the thousand little attentions which the circumstances of the dinner-table enable a gentleman to manifest toward a lady next to whom he is placed — was a considerable advance upon the former glacial frigidity of his demeanour. The duke, however, was pleased; Lord Clandon seemed likewise gratified by his brother's courtesy toward their young and beautiful relative, and his lordship took an opportunity to whisper to the duke when the ladies had retired, " You see, dear uncle, that my advice was good. Her Grace has unbent somewhat, and Bertram's wounded pride is healing proportionately."

On the following day there was a riding-party after breakfast. Bertram required not to be pressed to join it, and somehow or another, he found himself, when they started off, by Eliza's side. In the afternoon there was a boating-party; Bertram had no letters to write, no other kind of exercise, recommended by his physician, to take, no plea of indisposition to keep him indoors. He escorted the duchess to the barge, and he again kept by her side when they took their places therein. But at dinner-time prudence whispered in his ear that he must not continue to monopolize the society of his fair relative; Lord Clandon therefore escorted her to the banqueting-room.

In the evening, when they were all in the drawing-room, Lord Clandon, after lounging about with a languid, fashionable ease, chatting to one, then to another, pausing to look over a print, or loitering a few minutes near the piano at which a young lady was seated, presently dropped into a chair next to that occupied by the duchess, for Bertram, having been seated with her for the previous half-hour, had thought it prudent to bestow some attention on others present.

" You know not," said Lord Clandon, in a low voice to Eliza, " how deeply I felt my first meeting with that dearly beloved brother of mine, after our separation of more than three years. Your Grace must not think me so spoilt by the pursuits of the fashionable world as to have lost all fraternal love. Besides, Bertram is a brother of whom one can be proud. I do really believe he is the handsomest young man in all England. What exquisitely chiseled features! what symmetry of form! But all that is nothing in comparison with the light of intellect which shines upon his noble brow. And yet I fear me," added Clandon, in a tone of mysterious confidence, " that he is not happy."

Eliza was actually frightened as Hugh addressed her in these terms. She trembled to the very utmost confines of her being, but it was with an inward tremor, outwardly invisible. She dreaded lest Clandon had penetrated the secret, but as she bent her searching gaze upon him, while he was riveting his own looks upon the graceful form of Bertram at the farther extremity of the room, she felt satisfied that there was really nothing significant in his remarks, but that they were merely conversational, the topic being caught up by accident at the moment.

"Yes," continued Clandon, "I believe and hope that Bertram is destined to shine in the world. My uncle, your Grace's noble husband, — as noble in nature as he is in name, — has written most pressingly to the government to appoint Bertram as minister to one of the minor courts, and I have no doubt that in a few days intelligence will arrive that the Duke of Marchmont's interest has not been exercised in vain."

Eliza made some suitable response, and Lord Clandon, after a little more conversation of the same sort, highly eulogistic of Bertram, rose and sauntered away to another part of the room.

"My dear Mrs. Bailey," he presently took an opportunity of whispering in this lady's ear, "you saw yesterday and to-day that there has been some little change in my brother's demeanour toward the duchess. The fact is, I have no doubt things will be all right now, and those two in whom we are both naturally so much interested will get upon that amicable footing whereupon they ought to stand together."

"Yes," answered Mrs. Bailey, also in a low, cautious tone. "I thought that Mr. Vivian was behaving differently, for when we met at breakfast this morning, and the duchess glanced at the cold chicken, your brother was the first to offer her a wing."

"Nothing can transcend your shrewdness and penetration, my dear Mrs. Bailey," rejoined Clandon, with a smile, and he then lounged toward the piano again.

A week passed away from the date of that interview which we have recorded at such length in the preceding chapter, — an interview in which all the acutest and intensest feelings of which human nature is susceptible were called into play. Bertram and Eliza loved as fondly as ever; how could it be otherwise? But still they were both shielded against temptation by the rectitude of their principles, and thus when left alone for hours together, it was only in their looks and in their sighs that the duchess was unfaithful in her duty to a husband, or Bertram in that toward an uncle. They spoke no more of their love; it was a topic which by tacit consent they avoided. There was no significant pressure of the hands, no embrace snatched, no kiss exchanged. Yet as they sat or walked together, they often found themselves, when unobserved by others, gazing into the depths of each other's eyes; and when suddenly recollecting that there was impropriety and danger in this, they averted their looks amidst blushes on the cheeks and sighs coming up from the heart, — those looks, however, which were again so soon to meet and blend in the soft transfusion of their spirits. And these looks, impossible of control, impossible of repression, conveyed all the adoration which was mutually felt, — fondness commingling with fondness, the beams of tenderness entertwining together. But their discourse, as we have already said, was not upon love, and they were both too intellectual to dwell incessantly upon light, every-day topics, while, on the other hand, they could not bring their minds to the calm, serious, deliberate discussion of books, the sciences, or the arts. Therefore was it that long intervals of silence would reign between them, but a silence only of the tongues, — a silence in the midst of which a thousand things were said by the eloquent language of the eyes. Any stranger who might have seen that young man of godlike beauty, and that young lady of excelling loveliness, would have at once concluded that they were mated in marriage, or that they were lovers soon to be so joined, for even the most superficial glance must have perceived a certain fitness in the union of this couple. But destiny had decreed otherwise: they loved, yet they were not mated; they adored each other, but a stupendous gulf existed between them.

The Duke of Marchmont never for a moment suspected that it was possible for his wife and Bertram to form an attachment for each other, much less that they already loved from an old-standing acquaintance. He believed in the high honour of his nephew and in the purity of his wife. And he was right in so believing. He never even asked himself whether it was dangerous that they should thus be thrown together; the thought never for an instant entered his head. He was by no means a jealous man; that is to say, his jealousy was difficult to excite save and except by palpable evidence and on unquestionable grounds. He had flattered himself that Eliza loved him, and in the glacial coldness which she and Bertram had mutually shown during the first few days of the young man's presence at Oaklands, he had seen what he thought to be the demonstrations of positive aversion toward each other. Now, therefore, that he saw their manner mutually changed, he rejoiced to think that they had got upon a more friendly footing, and he said to himself, "Eliza is making atonement for her chilling inhospitality of the first ten days, and Bertram, with a chivalrous magnanimity, is doing his best to convince her that her former conduct is forgotten and forgiven. Hugh certainly gave me the best possible advice, and I wronged poor Bertram when I attributed the frigid reserve of his demeanour to an ungenerous aversion to the alliance which I have formed."

Thus, we say, did a week pass from the date of that interview in which Bertram and Eliza gave mutual explanations, and passed through such an ordeal of rending, agonizing emotions. This week flew rapidly away in the estimation of the two lovers, for such indeed they were. They both felt that it was wrong to be so much together, dangerous to what little remained of their wrecked happiness, if not dangerous to their virtue. Yet by an irresistible attraction were they brought together again and again, and each successive day beheld them more and more in each other's society. This was at least some happiness for them; it was another dream in which they were to a certain extent cradled, but a dream to the waking up from which they neither dared to look forward. At length, however, they were startled from this dream, as rudely as a loud clanging bell smites upon the ear of a sleeper, and they were startled up, too, unto a sense of anguish as acute as that which the doomed one feels when awakened by the striking of the clock which tells him that in another hour he is to die.

One morning, when the letters and newspapers were placed upon the breakfast-table, by the Duke of Marchmont's side, there was one document amongst the missives which the experienced eye of Bertram at once recognized as a despatch from the Foreign Office; and the quick glance which he threw upon the duchess made her likewise aware that something might now be expected, — something that should decree the doom of separation. The duke took up the packet, opened it, read it, and then, extending his hand to Bertram, said with a smiling countenance, "Permit me, my dear nephew, to be the first to congratulate you on your appointment as minister to the court of Florence."

" And I, my dear brother," exclaimed Lord Clandon, with every demonstration of pride and joy, " likewise congratulate you on this distinguished promotion."

Eliza proffered congratulations also, but it was with an almost preterhuman effort that she kept down the flood of feelings which surged up into her very throat. Mrs. Bailey and the other guests followed in the congratulatory strain, but the duchess perceived that it was with a forced urbanity and a difficultly repressed petulance of impatience that Bertram responded in a suitable and becoming manner.

" You perceive, my dear nephew," resumed the duke, " that your nomination to the Tuscan embassy is accompanied by the strictest injunctions that you set off for Italy with the least possible delay. Much as I shall be grieved to part with you, I dare not suffer my own selfish feelings to stand in the way of your public duties. To-morrow therefore, Bertram, you must bid us farewell."

" Yes, to-morrow," said the young man, in a voice the strangeness of which was only comprehended by Eliza, unless indeed it was also understood by Lord Clandon, who knew the secret of their love, for Mrs. Bailey was at the moment too busy in the discussion of a piece of perigord pie to take notice of anything else.

After breakfast Eliza and Bertram walked forth together in the garden. Mrs. Bailey and the other guests accompanied Lord Clandon on a visit to the grapery; the Duke of Marchmont retired to the library, to address a letter to the Foreign Secretary thanking that minister for the prompt attention paid to his request on Bertram's behalf. But on reaching the library, the duke perceived a note lying on the writing-table, addressed to himself. He wondered that it should have been left there, instead of being brought in unto him, as was the custom with all correspondence, the instant of its arrival. It was not a letter with any postmark upon it, and therefore it had not come from any distance. The writing of the address was unknown to the duke, but it occurred to him that it was written in a feigned hand. The writing all sloped backward instead of forward, just as if penned by the left hand instead of with the right; in short, it bore every indication of a studied attempt to disguise what it naturally would have been.

The duke opened it, but scarcely had he read the first two or three lines when the note dropped from his hand. He grew pale as death; sickness at the heart first seized upon him, then an almost maddening rage, and he was rushing to the door, when he abruptly stopped short. He grew calm all in an instant, but it was a terrible calmness, — a calmness full of deep, portentous menace. He picked up the note and read it through. Its contents were not long, but they were significant, — fearfully, terribly significant. This much might have been judged, were an observer present, by the growing corrugation of the duke's brow, the contraction of his forehead into lines so deep, so strongly marked that it appeared as if they never could leave that forehead in its wonted smoothness again.

"No," he muttered between his teeth, "it cannot be. It is a foul, base calumny. An anonymous writer! What faith is to be put in him? And yet — and yet — Eternal God! if it be so, I am the most miserable of men. Ay, but my vengeance shall be terrible."

Then he paced to and fro in violent agitation, until suddenly stopping short again, he looked at the letter once more. Dark and ominous was the shade which came over his countenance; his eyes shone with a sinister fire, his lips, ashy white, quivered as if with the palsy.

"No, no," he ejaculated at length, and as if in answer to some thought or plan which had almost settled itself in his mind; "not without better proof than this."

He slowly folded up the note, consigned it to his waistcoat pocket, and issued from the mansion by a private staircase and a side door. He descended into the grounds, plunging at once in the midst of the most thickly wooded avenues. In a few minutes he beheld his wife and Bertram walking at a little distance. She was not leaning upon his arm; there was nothing in their demeanour to confirm the suspicion and justify the jealous rage which that anonymous letter had excited in the duke's soul. Presently they turned at the end of the avenue; he concealed himself behind a group of evergreens, too thick for himself either to see or to be seen. But it was to their discourse, as they passed the spot, that he meant to listen. In a few minutes they drew near, and quite unconscious who was hidden by those bushes, they did pass.

"I shall leave immediately after breakfast to-morrow morning," Bertram was saying. "I must first repair to London, to pay my respects to the Secretary for Foreign Affairs, and then without loss of time must I proceed to Florence. It is most kind of my uncle to have interested himself in procuring me this appointment."

"Most kind," observed Eliza.

Then there was a pause in the discourse, so that as they passed on, the duke heard no more of the conversation when it was resumed. But if through the dense foliage his eyes had been able to observe the countenance of the two lovers, he would have seen that their looks were mournfully significant enough, though the words which had reached his ears were without the slightest import. Yet even in them there was a significancy, though the duke comprehended it not. They had been conversing seriously on the approaching separation; they had exerted all their fortitude to the attunement of their minds to the point necessary to make them recognize and acknowledge that it was better they should thus separate. There was consequently in their hearts a thankfulness of deeper meaning toward the duke than that which their words seemed to express, — a thankfulness that through his interest the opportunity and period had been brought about for a separation which they both laboured to recognize as so necessary. But the Duke of Marchmont, who neither saw their looks nor had overheard the previous portions of their discourse, was for a moment shocked that he should have given way to jealous suspicions on the faith of an anonymous letter. He was seized with a sense of profound humiliation; the natural pride of his soul revolted against his own conduct, and hurrying away from his hiding-place, he regained the mansion by a circuitous path.

Nevertheless the fiend of suspicion had obtained an entry into his soul; the demon of jealousy could not be so readily expelled as he wished, hoped, and thought. He endeavoured to compose himself to write, but he could not. He was restless and uneasy, and twenty times during the next hour did he draw forth the anonymous letter and scan its contents again. When luncheon was served up, he carefully watched the conduct of Bertram and Eliza toward each other, though without having the slightest appearance of doing so. His perception was now sharpened, and he caught a rapid exchange of glances between them, which under other circumstances he would not have noticed, but which were now fraught with a tremendous significancy to his imagination.

After luncheon, Lord Clandon proposed a boating-party, which was readily assented to by every one present. Again did the duke, during this recreation, continue to watch his wife and Bertram, and nothing occurred to strengthen his suspicions, and once more did he endeavour to reason himself into the belief that they were utterly unfounded. At about four o'clock the company, leaving the boats, retraced their way to the mansion, and the ladies separated to their own chambers to make some change in their toilets. The duke retired to the library, which commanded a view of the grounds, and from the window did he keep watch. Presently he beheld Eliza and Bertram straying forth alone together, and slowly bending their steps toward the shady avenues. Again too did he descend by the private staircase and issue forth by the side door.

It was a delicious autumnal afternoon, and a genial warmth filled the atmosphere. Eliza had already dressed herself for dinner, when putting off her boating raiment, so as to avoid the trouble of performing another toilet. She wore a dark half-mourning dress, with a low body, according to the fashion of the times. Her arms were bare, — those arms so exquisitely rounded; her bosom, neck, and shoulders shone dazzlingly in their polished whiteness. Nothing sets off a finely rounded form to greater advantage than dark apparel, and nothing can throw out the transparent purity of the skin more brilliantly. The superb contours of Eliza's shape, now in all the glory of rich womanhood, and the spotless beauty of her complexion, were thus advantageously displayed by her half-mourning garb. Her raven hair, with a rich velvet gloss upon it, flowed in heavy masses upon those dazzling shoulders, and formed a dark cloud against which her swanlike neck seemed an alabaster pillar. Never in the eyes of Bertram Vivian had she seemed so wondrously beautiful before, and as he walked by her side, gazing upon her with an irresistible fascination, his heart, first melting into tenderness, was soon rent with agony at the thought that this was the last time they would ever be alone together, — the last time perhaps that he would ever have an opportunity of so gazing, without restraint, on the object of his heart's adoration. And she too was profoundly moved. He had said at the interview by the fountain that when they parted it would be for ever, and these words he had not since recalled; they remained therefore deeply imprinted upon her heart.

"To-morrow, Eliza," said Bertram, at length breaking a long silence, and speaking in the low, deep voice of indescribable mournfulness, "to-morrow we shall separate, and prudence tells me that it must be for ever. Would to God," he exclaimed, in a sudden paroxysm of that wild excitement which he had displayed at the fountain, but to which until now he had not again given way, — "would to God that I had not lingered here so long. I feel like one whose next step will be to plunge into the vortex of despair."

"Bertram, Bertram," murmured the afflicted lady, "we must exert that fortitude which by tacit consent has hitherto sustained us since we met yonder," — and her eyes glanced toward the fountain.

"Oh, that expression of tacit consent, Eliza," ejaculated Vivian; "does it not show that there is a blending of our spirits, a secret intelligence existing between our hearts, a transfusion of feeling from soul to soul — "

"Hush, Bertram," said the duchess; "we must not, we dare not give way again to our recollections of the past."

"Oh, but that past is all our own, Eliza," cried Vivian, with growing excitement; "though the present is taken from us, and the future — Ah, that future, dating from to-morrow. It will be a hideous blank on which I shudder to fix my gaze. No, not a hideous blank; it will be a world of rending, torturing feelings. By Heaven, Eliza, I shall go mad! I cannot endure it — I shall lay violent hands upon myself."

"Bertram," almost shrieked forth the wretched duchess, in a voice of piercing agony, "you horrify me — you fill me with despair."

"Heaven forgive me, Eliza, for thus torturing you," said Bertram, quickly, "but I am not able to control my feelings. Oh, wherefore was I born to endure so much misery? Wherefore did I ever know you? Angel that you were to me at the time when we first loved, it is anguish, it is torture, it is crucifixion, to look upon you with the knowledge that you are lost to me, — that you are another's. Oh, Eliza, you know not how much I was indebted to that love of yours. I never told you the truth before; I will tell it to you now. I was plunging headlong into the vortex of dissipation, I was weakly and shamefully suffering myself to be led on into vicious pleasures and the ways of extravagance, when you suddenly appeared on my path, clothed with all the brightness and the sweetness of a guardian angel. I loved you; you loved me in return, and it was that delicious love of yours which made me an altered being. From that moment my existence has been one of purity and honour, and I can look the world in the face without being conscious of aught to raise up a blush to my cheeks. It was you who did this, Eliza, you who saved me. How much therefore do I owe you! with what grateful recollections is my love intertwined. Think you, then, that a love which is so blended with gratitude can easily endure disappointment? No, Eliza, no. You are dearer to me than life, and to-morrow, when we separate, it will be for me like parting from that very life itself."

"Oh, Bertram, what can I say, what can I do, to comfort you?" murmured the almost heart-broken Eliza, as the tears rained down her cheeks and her bosom was convulsed with sobs.

"What can you do, what can you say, Eliza? Nothing, nothing. There is but one thing — No, no, I dare not mention it; I will not entice you from your husband. But to leave you with him is to condemn myself to a life of horror, or else to cut it short and perish in the blood of a distracted suicide."

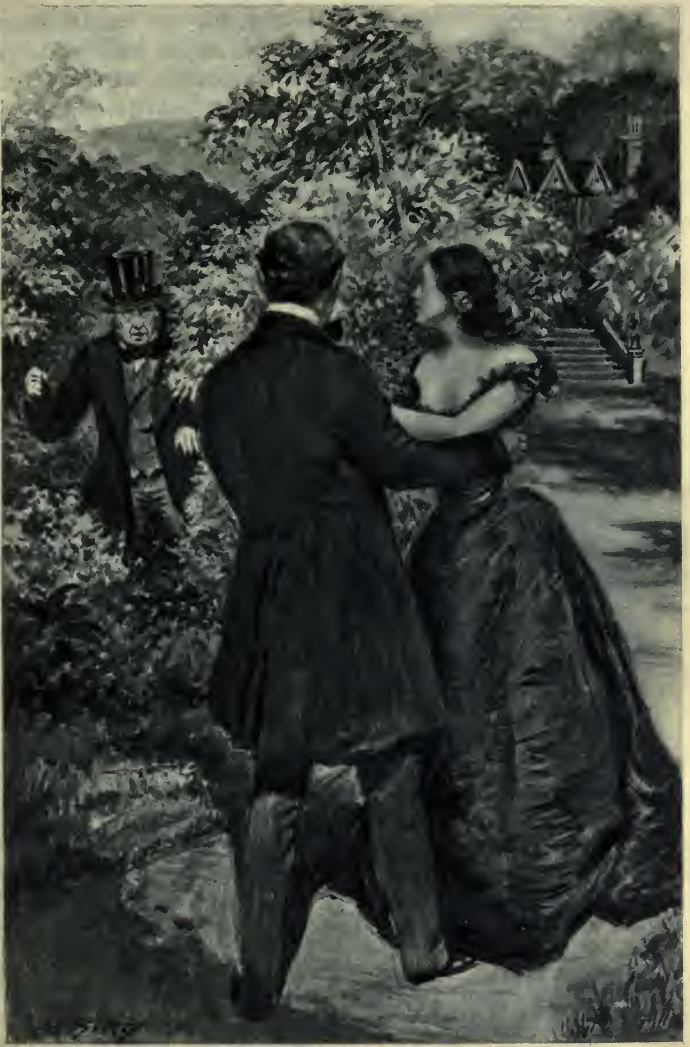
"Bertram," shrieked Eliza, wildly, "recall those dreadful words. Oh, recall them, I implore you! For my sake, for all the love I bear you — "

"Oh, to hear you speak thus of your love," cried the impetuous and impassioned Bertram, "is the revival of joy ineffable," and obedient to the impulse of the moment, he caught Eliza in his arms, he strained her to his breast.

At that instant a cry so wild and savage that it resembled that of a ferocious hyena smote on the ears of Bertram and the duchess, and starting from each other's embrace, they

"THOSE LOOKS ENCOUNTERED THE DUKE"

Photogravure from original by Bird



flung their terrified looks around. Those looks encountered the duke, who was just emerging from a shady avenue. Emerging! no, he was rushing on with the mad fury of the wild beast whose cry his own had resembled, and Eliza, with a half-stifled moan of soul-crushed agony, dropped senseless upon the ground. All in an instant the spectacle of the rapidly advancing duke vanished from Bertram's gaze; he beheld only the inanimate form of the beloved Eliza. He raised her in his arms; kneeling upon the ground, he supported her against his breast. He besought her in passionate accents to open her eyes and to look upon him.

"Leave her, sir," thundered the voice of the duke; "leave her, sir. Begone — depart hence, execrable villain that you are."

"Hear me, uncle, hear me, I conjure you!" exclaimed Vivian, a prey to such wild and torturing feelings as no pen can describe. "If not for my sake, at least for hers — "

"Begone, sir," again thundered forth the duke, and rushing forward, he violently tore the still inanimate form of his wife from Bertram's arms.

At this instant it happened that two of the female servants, having been to some other part of the grounds, appeared upon the spot, to which they were attracted by the fierce and thundering ejaculations of their ducal master. They were astounded at what they beheld, — that master tearing away his wife from the arms of Bertram Vivian, the duchess insensible, Bertram himself pale and quivering with excitement.

"Bear your mistress to the house," said the duke, sternly, "and consign her to the care of her maids."

The two female domestics hastened to obey the instructions thus given them, and as they bore away the inanimate form of Eliza, the duke turned to follow.

"Uncle, for God's sake hear me!" cried Bertram, in a voice of most imploring agony, as he caught the duke by the arm.

"Not a word, sir, not a single word," vociferated the furious husband, and in his mad rage he struck his nephew a violent blow upon the temple.

The young man's countenance became crimson, turning all in a moment from the whiteness of a sheet to the hue of a peony, and his first impulse was to avenge the blow. But not more quickly flashes the lightning through the air than did the recollection glance in unto Bertram's mind that it was his uncle — a much older man than himself — who had thus struck him, and turning abruptly away, he rushed madly along the avenue. At the extremity thereof he encountered his brother, Lord Clandon.

"Bertram! for Heaven's sake what is the matter?" exclaimed Hugh, with an air of amazement at his brother's fearfully excited looks and frenzied pace.

"Hugh," cried Bertram, stopping suddenly short, and addressing Lord Clandon in broken sentences, "something terrible has happened — terrible, terrible. Our uncle believes that Eliza is guilty — For God's sake go to him! Assure him that on the oath of one who never yet was convicted of falsehood, she is innocent! Dearest, dearest brother, save poor Eliza, save her, for God's sake! No matter what may happen to me!"

"But what has occurred, Bertram? Tell me; speak! You know that I will do anything I can to serve you —"

"The tale is too long to tell," hastily responded the younger brother, "and every moment is precious, — precious as life itself. Go quick — see the duke — swear to him that his wife is innocent. Go, Hugh, go, I beseech you."

"But where can I see you again?" asked Lord Clandon, quickly. "It is evident that you are in a state of excitement —"

"See me?" ejaculated Bertram, as if for a moment scarcely comprehending the question. "Yes, yes, I must see you again — I must receive the assurance that the duke is satisfied. Where shall we meet? I dare not return — Come to me presently at the village tavern; I will await you there."

"Be it so," rejoined Clandon, rapidly. "I will do my best," and he hurried toward the mansion, while Bertram Vivian pursued his own frenzied, distracted course in the direction of the village about a mile distant.

CHAPTER VIII

THE AVENGING HUSBAND

Lord Clandon reached the house, and in the looks of the domestics whom he found in the hall he beheld consternation and wonderment depicted. At the same instant the Duke of Marchmont came hastening down the staircase, crying in a loud voice, " Let Mrs. Bailey's carriage be got ready this moment. Hasten away, some of you, to give the orders. Let there be not a single instant lost unnecessarily."

Three or four footmen scampered off to the stables to issue their master's commands, and the duke, now perceiving Lord Clandon, walked straight up to him with sternly fierce looks, and said, in tones of deep, concentrated rage, " Hugh, my happiness is wrecked through your accursed counsel."

" For Heaven's sake, my dear uncle," exclaimed Lord Clandon, " do not reproach me! Be just, be generous, as you have ever yet proved yourself."

" Oh, Hugh, I am half-mad!" murmured the duke. " Forgive me — I wronged you. But come hither."

Thus speaking, he hurried his nephew into the nearest parlour, and when they were alone there together, he began pacing to and fro in the most violent agitation.

" My dear uncle, it kills me to behold you thus," said Clandon, approaching his relative with an air of earnest, sympathizing entreaty. " Tell me what I can do — "

" Nothing, nothing; my happiness is gone for ever. And yet," said the duke, suddenly assuming a calmer aspect and a more dignified manner, " I ought not to torture myself thus for a vile woman and an infamous young man. Hugh, are you aware," he added, speaking as if through his set teeth, " that she whom I lately called my wife and loved as such is unworthy of that name and of that love? "

"Alas! my dear uncle," responded Lord Clandon, "I met my unfortunate brother, and he — "

"Not a syllable, Hugh," interrupted the duke, sternly, "not a syllable. I know your generous heart, I know how you love your brother, but if you dare plead for him, I quit the room this instant, or you shall quit the house for ever. I know that they will tell me they are innocent. Guilt always proclaims its innocence, and the more damning it is, the bolder is its effrontery. Hugh, not another word," and thus speaking, the Duke of Marchmont walked forth from the room.

Lord Clandon remained there for a few minutes after his uncle had left him, and then he hastily ascended toward the drawing-room. But on the landing he met Mrs. Bailey, who was descending from her own chamber, ready dressed as if for a journey.

"Oh, dear me, my lord," she said, quivering with a nervous trepidation, "what a dreadful thing! The duke has ordered me to take Eliza away as soon as my travelling-carriage can be got in readiness — "

"And what else did he say?" asked Hugh, eagerly.

"Nothing," responded Mrs. Bailey; "nor would he allow me to put in a single word. I hope, my lord, you have not told his Grace all that I said to you the other day?"

"Not for worlds, Mrs. Bailey, not for worlds, my dear madam," rejoined Clandon, hastily. "And for Heaven's sake, if the duke questions you in any shape or form before you take your departure, beware how you breathe a syllable of those circumstances which you mentioned to me."

"I shall take very good care not to do that," answered the lady, still trembling with nervous agitation. "Oh, what a shocking thing! And I who hadn't my smelling-bottle at the moment I heard of it."

"Hush! footsteps are ascending," said Lord Clandon.

In a few moments the Duke of Marchmont made his appearance; his demeanour now sternly and haughtily composed, but with an evidently forced rigidity of the features, and his countenance was ghastly pale.

"My dear madam," he said, approaching Mrs. Bailey and taking her hand, "I am grieved that it should become your duty, as my wife's only remaining relative upon her own side, to bear her away from a house which ceases to be her home. I thank you for the readiness with which you have complied with my request. Take the guilty woman with you; in a few days my solicitors shall communicate to you what my intentions are. Farewell, madam. Hugh, attend upon Mrs. Bailey to her carriage, and see that she accompanies her."

With these words, the duke was moving abruptly away, when, as a thought struck him, he turned and said, " If she goes down upon her knees, Hugh, to entreat and implore that you will bring a conciliatory message to me, I command you, on pain of my unforgiving displeasure, on pain of my eternal wrath, to refuse compliance."

He then passed into the nearest room, locking the door behind him, so that the quick turning of the key reached the ears of Mrs. Bailey and Lord Clandon, who remained upon the landing. In a few minutes one of Eliza's maids descended from above, and presenting a letter to Mrs. Bailey, said, " Her Grace entreats, ma'am, that you will hand this to the duke."

" Indeed, poor soul," cried Mrs. Bailey, " I can do nothing of the sort, for the duke will neither hear nor see anybody on her Grace's behalf. Unless indeed your lordship," she added, addressing Clandon, " would make one last effort — "

" Yes, yes, I will," responded Hugh. " Yes, I will! It is a sacred duty, and even though I risk my uncle's displeasure, I will perform it."

He took the letter, and hastened to knock at the door of the apartment in which the duke had shut himself. His Grace demanded from within who it was, and when Lord Clandon answered, the door was at once opened. The uncle and nephew remained closeted there together for about ten minutes, while Mrs. Bailey and the lady's-maid waited on the landing.

" How is her Grace now? " inquired the former, " and why was it she begged I would not come into her room a little while back? "

" Her Grace, ma'am," replied the maid, with a saddened countenance, " looks as if she were ten years older than she was an hour back. But it was with a strange calmness she sat herself down to write that letter which Lord Clandon has so kindly taken into the duke. Heaven send that its contents may move his Grace! It was only because my poor mistress was occupied on that letter that she could not see you. Oh, ma'am, her Grace may have been weak and imprudent, but it is hard to believe her guilty."

Mrs. Bailey — being well acquainted with all Eliza's earlier history, and knowing how deeply she had loved Bertram, besides being a woman whose notions of the better side of humanity had been warped, if not actually spoiled by the frivolities of fashionable life — really did believe in her own heart that Eliza was completely guilty, and she could not help shaking her head ominously in response to the maid's expressed doubt on the subject. The countenance of the maid herself therefore fell suddenly as she beheld that look, and her own previously wavering opinion settled into a conviction unfavourable to the unfortunate Eliza.

At this moment Lord Clandon came forth from the apartment, where he had been closeted with the duke, and his looks showed that his mission had proved unsuccessful.

"His Grace read the letter," he said, in a low, deep voice. "After much trouble I persuaded him that this was at least an act of justice which he owed toward the duchess. But his opinion is not to be moved, nor his resolve shaken. His commands are that with the least possible delay the duchess is to leave the house."

The maid, with a sorrowful countenance, ascended the stairs, followed by Mrs. Bailey, and they entered the boudoir, where Eliza was pacing to and fro in a state of mind which may be more readily imagined than described. Another of her maids had remained with her, and this one was standing aside, following with mournful looks the form of her mistress as she thus paced to and fro. Eliza did indeed seem as if she had received a most fearful shock: her countenance was pale as death, her eyes were haggard, her look was as careworn as if she had passed through a dozen years of unceasing, ineffable sorrow. The instant the door opened, her eyes, glistening feverishly with uneasiness and suspense, were flung upon those who entered, and Mrs. Bailey hastening forward, said, "O Eliza, how could you — "

"Madam," interrupted the duchess, all her trepidation settling down in a moment into the most dignified calmness, "I see that you believe me guilty, but I am innocent."

"Well, my dear," answered Mrs. Bailey, "I most sincerely hope you are, but of course you know best."

"My letter, Jane?" said the duchess, turning proudly and indignantly away from her relative, and addressing herself to the maid who had followed Mrs. Bailey into the room; "has it been sent to his Grace?" and now again there was the feverish glitter of suspense in her eyes as she awaited the response.

"The duke," Mrs. Bailey hastened to interject, "positively forbade any one to bring him either letter or message, and he locked himself in a room — "

"My letter, Jane?" ejaculated the duchess, now quivering visibly with impatience, but disdaining to take any further notice of Mrs. Bailey, since this lady had shown that she believed in her guilt.

"Please your Grace," answered Jane, "Lord Clandon kindly took charge of the letter, his lordship was very much affected, and he was closeted with his Grace for nearly a quarter of an hour. But, my lady — "

"Enough, Jane," said the duchess, her marble features suddenly becoming fixed and rigid in the last stage of despair. "I understand you. The duke believes me not. I therefore leave his house at once. But before I go, let me call God to witness that if I have been thoughtless, if I have been weak, if I have been imprudent, I have not been guilty."

"O Eliza — my dear Eliza!" said Mrs. Bailey, still full of a nervous trepidation, "pray don't call God's name in vain."

"Woman," ejaculated Eliza, fiercely, as she turned abruptly around upon her relative, "do you dare stand forward as my accuser?" Then, as Mrs. Bailey staggered back, frightened and aghast, the duchess went on to say, "I will not accept a home from you. You cannot lay your hand upon your heart and say that you are sensible of no wrongs toward me. You know what I mean. I could curse you, were it not that I should involve the memory of my deceased parent in the same frightful malediction. If I were guilty — but God is my witness that I am not — how much of that guilt would be attributable to your detestable machinations! Begone! remain not here another moment in my presence."

Mrs. Bailey — frightened to death lest Eliza should enter into the fullest explanations relative to the past, and thereby seriously compromise her — hurried from the room, and rushed down-stairs in a condition of bewildered terror.

"Where is the duchess?" asked Lord Clandon, but as

Mrs. Bailey sped past him, not knowing what she was about, he hurried after her. "Do tell me, my dear madam," he continued, in a voice full of anxiety and uneasiness, "what has occurred?"

"Don't ask me, my lord! Don't ask me, I beseech you!" she ejaculated. "To be abused and reviled and taunted, after I helped to make her a duchess, — it is perfectly shocking."

"Shocking indeed," said Lord Clandon, who was now enabled to comprehend pretty well what had taken place. "But are you going without her?" he asked, as Mrs. Bailey rushed through the hall to her carriage, which was waiting at the entrance.

"Yes, my lord; pray let me go. I can assure you I have had quite enough of Oaklands."

"But the duke's commands are that you should take the duchess with you."

"The duchess will not come, and thank Heaven that she won't!" rejoined Mrs. Bailey, who was all in a flutter of mingled anger and affright, and without even waiting to be handed to the carriage, she scrambled up into it as best she could.

Lord Clandon bowed courteously, and the equipage drove away. Then he stood irresolute for a few moments how to act. Mrs. Bailey had taken her departure, leaving the duchess behind, and the duke's orders were consequently disobeyed. Hugh decided, after a short deliberation with himself, upon ascending to his uncle's apartment to obtain further instructions.

Let us now see what in the meanwhile had taken place in Eliza's chamber. So soon as Mrs. Bailey had fled thence in the manner already described, the Duchess of Marchmont, sinking down from her temporary excitement, into that blank, dead, unnatural calmness which indicated utter despair, said to her maids, "Give me my bonnet, my shawl, my gloves, and I will take my departure."

"Shall I order a carriage for your Grace?" inquired Jane, adown whose cheeks the tears were trickling, although in her heart she believed the duchess guilty notwithstanding her solemn protestations to the contrary.

"No," answered Eliza, "I will depart on foot. Portionless and penniless was I received as a wife; portionless and penniless will I go forth as a discarded and branded creature."

The two maids threw themselves weeping at Eliza's feet, conjuring her not to carry this resolve into execution, but she was firm, and in that very firmness she issued her commands in a voice that seemed more than decisive: it was even stern. The maids rose, and in profound silence gave her the things she asked for. When she was dressed for departure, her looks softened toward them, and she said, in a tremulous voice, "Your kindness, my dear girls, touches me deeply, for, oh, this is indeed a trial in the midst of which such kindness is to be felt. Farewell. Trouble not yourselves for me. Remain here until you are sought out and questions are put to you as to the mode of my departure. Then say that as I brought nothing with me of my own when the duke took me as a wife, so I bear nothing away with me. Tell him likewise that in my writing-desk he will find the papers to which I alluded in the letter just now sent him. And once again, farewell."

With these last words — and not trusting herself to fling another look upon the two weeping damsels — the duchess abruptly quitted the chamber. Seeking the private staircase, she descended it quickly, and passed out of the side door into the grounds. No one observed her egress, and the two maids remained together in the chamber, weeping bitterly at the mournful circumstances under which they were thus suddenly deprived of a mistress whom they loved, and whose conduct had been uniformly kind toward them.

Meanwhile Lord Clandon, as the reader will recollect, had returned to the apartment wherein the duke had locked himself, his nephew's object now being to report that Mrs. Bailey had gone without the duchess, and to obtain further instructions. In about ten minutes Lord Clandon issued forth again, and summoning a footman, desired him to go and give immediate instructions to have the plain chariot gotten in readiness. He then ascended to the room which Eliza had so recently left, and knocked gently at the door. The summons was at once answered by Jane, down whose cheeks the tears of affliction were still flowing fast.

"I wish to speak a few words to her Grace," said Clandon, the expression of whose countenance was deeply mournful.

"Her Grace, my lord, is gone," answered Jane, sobbing violently.

"Gone?" ejaculated Clandon, in astonishment. "What mean you? No equipage has departed —"

"Her Grace would not have a carriage," rejoined the lady's-maid; "she is gone away on foot."

"On foot?" echoed Clandon, with continued amazement. "But where? whither? What purpose has her Grace in view?"

"All this, my lord, I know not," answered Jane. "Her Grace bade us farewell, and departed, as I have told you."

Lord Clandon descended the stairs slowly, and in profound mental deliberation. Again he knocked at the door of the apartment in which the duke had shut himself, but this time the key turned not in the lock. From within, however, the duke demanded in a voice which sounded irritable and stern, "Who is it? Wherefore am I thus incessantly disturbed?"

"It is I, uncle," answered Lord Clandon. "Her Grace has taken her departure —"

"Enough. Trouble me no more. Leave me, I insist," exclaimed the duke from within. "Give orders, Hugh, that no one comes to me. I would be alone — entirely alone."

Lord Clandon dared not speak another word, and hastening away from the door, he was about to summon a domestic, when he beheld his own valet Travers ascending the stairs.

"Go and counter-order the travelling-carriage," said Clandon, "which a few minutes back I commanded to be got in readiness."

"Yes, my lord," said the valet, and he hurried off to execute his master's instructions.

It was now six o'clock in the evening, and the guests were all grouped in the drawing-room, discussing in whispers as much as they knew of what had taken place. Some were suggesting the propriety of immediately ordering their carriages and taking their departure, as their presence under existing circumstances might be regarded as an indelicate intrusion. But others recommended that no precipitate steps should be taken, as after all it might transpire that the duchess had been wrongly judged, and a complete reconciliation might take place between herself and the duke, for they knew not that Eliza had already left Oaklands.

In the midst of these whisperings, Lord Clandon entered the drawing-room, and the guests perceived at once by his countenance that something terribly decisive had taken place. He expressed his regret that anything should have occurred to mar the pleasure which had hitherto prevailed at the mansion, and he delicately yet plainly intimated that an irreparable breach had arisen between his uncle and the duchess, that the latter had left the mansion, and that the former, overwhelmed with affliction, had shut himself up in the solitude of his apartment. The guests longed to hear more explicit details, but good taste prevented them from putting any questions, and they now saw that there was nothing for them to do but to order their carriages and separate to their respective homes. As a matter of courtesy, Lord Clandon requested them to wait for dinner, which would be shortly served up, but this, under the circumstances, was a mere ceremonial act of politeness, which was of course declined. Immediate orders were issued to have trunks packed up and carriages gotten in readiness. The commands were promptly obeyed, and by seven o'clock on this memorable evening the guests had all taken their departure.

Lord Clandon now hurried off toward the village where he had promised to meet his brother, and which was about a mile distant. Less than a quarter of an hour's rapid walk brought him to the tavern in the village, and on inquiring for the Honourable Mr. Bertram Vivian, he was at once shown into the little parlour where his brother, with feverish anxiety and harrowing suspense, was awaiting his arrival. Very nearly three hours had elapsed since they parted in the grounds of the mansion, and when Bertram so passionately implored Hugh to hasten away and assure their uncle of his wife's innocence. During this interval, which had seemed an entire age, the unfortunate Bertram had endured agonies of mind which, if spread over whole centuries, and portioned out as the lot of millions of human beings, would even thus in each infinitesimal part have been excruciatingly intolerable, but which, when condensed into the space of three hours, and aggregated as the burden which a single individual had to bear, were overpowering and soul-crushing beyond the capacity of language to describe. The first glance which Lord Clandon threw upon his brother, as he entered the little parlour of the village inn, showed him how fearfully Bertram must have suffered.

" What tidings, Hugh? " inquired Bertram, literally gasping with the fever of suspense, and with the horrible misgivings which Lord Clandon's melancholy expression of countenance was but too well calculated to inspire.

" Alas! nothing good," was the elder brother's response.

" Nothing good," murmured the unhappy Bertram, his features indicative of despair. " But what has occurred? Tell me, Hugh," he exclaimed, with feverish haste. " Did you assure our uncle — "

" My dear Bertram," rejoined Lord Clandon, taking his brother's hand and pressing it, " I did all that I could, but in vain."

" And my letter?" cried Bertram; " has not the duke had my letter? "

" Your letter? " exclaimed Clandon, in astonishment.

" But now I bethink me," Bertram went on to say rapidly, " it could not have reached the house before you must have left. I despatched it by a boy half an hour back. I was mad, frenzied, goaded to desperation. The time was passing, and you came not — I knew not what to do — my anxiety was intolerable — "

" And what said you to the duke in your letter? " asked Lord Clandon.

" I scarcely recollect," replied Bertram. " I tell you that I was mad when I wrote it — I am mad still. My God, and she innocent. But where is she, Hugh? What has become of her? "

" She has left Oaklands," answered Lord Clandon. " First of all she was to depart with Mrs. Bailey — "

" And she has left? " exclaimed Bertram, wildly; " she has left? She has lost her home, — she who is innocent. Oh, wretch that I am! It is I that have caused this fearful havoc of feelings, — this frightful desolation of circumstances," and the miserable young man wrung his hands bitterly. " But she has left, you say? " he almost immediately added. " Whither has she gone? "

" I know not," responded Clandon. " Mrs. Bailey departed without her, and the unfortunate Eliza quitted the house on foot, alone — "

" Good heavens! is this possible? " ejaculated Bertram, and the wildness of frenzy was in his eyes. " Eliza gone forth alone, unattended, on foot, an outcast, a wanderer! Oh, it is intolerable," and snatching up his hat, he rushed madly to the door.

" Whither would you go, Bertram? " cried Lord Clandon, seizing his brother forcibly by the arm to hold him back.

" Whither would I go? " ejaculated the almost maddened young man. " To find her whom my insensate passion has ruined; to console her, if consolation be possible, to implore her pardon, to adopt means to prove her innocence — "

" But, Bertram — "

" Detain me not, Hugh, detain me not," and thus speaking with increasing frenzy of feelings and rabid vehemence of manner, Bertram rushed forth from the village inn.

Lord Clandon hurried out to the threshold of the front door, but his brother had already disappeared from his view.

CHAPTER IX

THE CATASTROPHE

About a quarter of an hour after Lord Clandon had left the mansion to keep his appointment with Bertram, a letter, addressed to the Duke of Marchmont, was brought by a boy and delivered to the hall porter. The boy, who was already paid for his trouble, tarried not for any further recompense, but hurried away the moment he had acquitted himself of his commission. That was the letter which Bertram had sent, but the address on the outside, as well as the contents within, were written in a hand so changed by the violent agitation of the writer, that no one, however familiar with his usual style of penmanship, would for a moment have suspected that it was his own. The hall porter gave the letter to a footman, who, proceeding up-stairs, knocked at the door of the apartment in which the Duke of Marchmont still remained.

" Who is there? " demanded the nobleman from within, and his voice was half-stern, half-passionate. " I expressly ordered — "

" A letter, my lord," responded the footman, trembling with alarm.

" From whom? " demanded the duke.

" I know not, my lord," rejoined the domestic. " It is in a strange hand — "

The duke opened the door, and received the letter. The footman, as he caught a momentary glimpse of his master's countenance, saw that it was deadly pale, with the traces of all strongly wrought feelings upon it. Hastily closing the door again, the duke looked at the address, and not recognizing the writing, opened the letter, but the instant his eye settled on the first words of its contents, he dashed it upon the carpet, and trampled it under foot. Ashamed of himself, the very next instant, for this impotent manifestation of vindictive fury, the Duke of Marchmont picked the letter up, and prompted by an irresistible feeling of curiosity to see what Bertram could possibly have to adduce in the face of evidence which his Grace regarded as so decisive, he sat down and read the letter through. It consisted chiefly of broken sentences, solemn oaths, sacred adjurations, — all attesting the innocence of the duchess, and there were some incoherent allusions to a long-existing love between them, as well as to a cruel deception practised by her deceased father and Mrs. Bailey in order to make her the duke's wife, so that a gleam of light began to dawn in unto the comprehension of Eliza's husband.

"Good heavens!" he said to himself, with a feeling of horror at the lengths to which he had gone, "if it be indeed true that in a moment of weakness, and under the influence of sorrow's agony at the idea of parting, Bertram should have caught her in his arms, but that she was innocent. Yet no, I cannot think it. I was prepared for protestations of innocence, and I even said that the deeper the guilt, the more impassioned its denial. No, no; they are guilty, — this viper of a nephew, that wanton of a woman. But their love of other times, and that deception practised on her — "

And the duke was staggered. He pressed his hand to his brow; he would have given worlds to discover that the wife whom he had loved so fondly, and of whom he had been so proud, was really innocent. His soul yearned to think her so; his heart bled at the idea of its possibility, and at his own implacable harshness. An idea struck him. He went forth from the room, and inquired for Lord Clandon, but he was informed that Hugh had gone out a little time previously. Then the duke ordered Jane, her Grace's principal lady's-maid, to be sent to him in the drawing-room. During the few minutes which elapsed ere the young woman made her appearance, the Duke of Marchmont composed his looks into an expression of cold and severe dignity, for he was too proud to display before others all he felt.

"Jane," he said, as the maid entered the room with a sorrowful countenance, and with the traces of weeping still upon it, "your mistress has taken her departure?"

"Yes, my lord," was the response. "Her Grace was very, very unhappy — "

"And whither has she gone?" interrupted the duke.

"I know not, my lord."

"But the instructions she gave to the coachman? You doubtless attended her to the carriage."

"My lord," rejoined the maid, tears bursting forth afresh, "her Grace went away on foot."

"On foot?" cried the nobleman, in astonishment.

"Yes, my lord," continued Jane. "Her Grace said that she came to you without a carriage, and she would go away as portionless."

"Ah!" murmured the duke, and then his eyes were earnestly fixed upon the maid, as if his soul experienced an avidity for whatsoever words of explanation might next come from her lips.

"Her Grace called God to witness her innocence," proceeded the maid. "Ah, my lord! it would be a shocking thing to fancy human nature is so bad to take such an oath —"

But the young woman stopped short, for she recollected Mrs. Bailey's words and manner, and she trembled at the idea of pledging herself to a belief in the innocence of one who might after all be guilty.

"And what else did the duchess say?" demanded the duke, with the petulance of feverish impatience.

"Her Grace bade me tell your lordship," responded Jane, "that you would find in her writing-desk the several documents to which her letter to your Grace made allusion, — I mean the letter which Lord Clandon was good enough to take in to your Grace."

"Ah, that letter! I did not — But no matter," and the duke hastened abruptly from the room.

He ascended to his wife's boudoir. He found the writing-desk; he knew it to be the one which her father had left behind him, and which he himself had placed in Eliza's hands a short time after the funeral. It was unlocked, for the duchess had purposely left it so. The duke drew forth its contents, and Bertram's letters to the late Captain Lacey, which he found therein, gave him a complete insight into all those bygone matters to which his unhappy young nephew's agitated communication from the village had merely made rapid and almost incoherent allusions.

The duke was astounded: a veil fell from his eyes, and in a moment he comprehended the real meaning of that strange conduct which Bertram and Eliza had observed toward each other during the first few days of the young gentleman's visit to Oaklands. And he, the duke, had purposely thrown them together. He had studied to place them on a friendly footing. Ah, if he were dishonoured, he had indeed, though unconsciously, been the author of that dishonour. But what in his heart he had for the last quarter of an hour been wishing and yearning and craving might come to pass, he now more than half-believed. Was it not indeed possible, nay, more, was it not probable, that Eliza had been only weak, not guilty, and that Bertram's vindication was true, when it declared that under the influence of irrepressible feelings — not being at the moment master of himself — he had caught her in his arms? The longer the duke thought of this, the more was he inclined to put faith in Bertram's statement. The very circumstances attending the departure of his wife, as he had just heard them from Jane's lips, seemed to be tinctured with a dignity far more compatible with conscious innocence than with a sense of guilt.

"O Eliza! Eliza!" groaned the unhappy duke, in the mingled anguish and reviving fondness of his heart; "if I have wronged you, — good heavens, if I have wronged you! And that I have, I fear, nay, I am well-nigh convinced. You sought not to be on intimate terms with Bertram; you were cold and distant toward him. Your demeanour was, under all circumstances, that which it ought to have been. And I threw you together, I forced you into each other's society, I left you alone together. Ah! it was natural you should speak of the past, — victims that you had both been made to a hideous deception. Yes, Eliza, you are innocent. Your weakness I forgive. You shall come to my arms again, and it is I who will on my knees sue at your feet for pardon."

The duke rushed forth from the boudoir in a state of mind bordering on frenzy. All his habitual dignity was forgotten, — all his wonted pride was as nought, under the influence of the strong feelings which now possessed him. He reached the landing whence the drawing-room opened, and there he abruptly encountered Lord Clandon, who had just hurried back from the village after the interview with his brother.

"Ah!" ejaculated the duke, as if the presence of his elder nephew suddenly reminded him of things which, in the previous whirl of his conflicting, distracting thoughts, he had utterly lost sight of. "Come hither," and the duke abruptly passed into the drawing-room, followed by Lord Clandon.

Their interview did not last above ten minutes, but what its nature was, we have at present no means of describing. Suffice it to say that at the expiration of this brief interview, the door opened as abruptly as when the duke entered that room, and his Grace came forth. Descending to the hall, he said, in a quick, excited manner to the lackeys, whom he found there, "Let all the male domestics disperse themselves over the neighbourhood, in search of the duchess. If her Grace be found, tell her that I — her husband — have wronged her."

Ejaculations of joy burst forth from the lips of all who had heard this announcement of Eliza's innocence, for her natural goodness and her affably condescending manners had endeared her to the entire household of which she was so late the mistress.

"Yes," continued the duke, his voice swelling with the excitement of his feelings, "let her Grace be told that I have wronged her, that I beseech her to return, and that she will be received with open arms. Disperse yourselves all about, enter every house, cottage, or hut, where it is possible that your mistress may have taken refuge. Depart, I say, and a hundred guineas for him who finds her ladyship. I also shall go forth in the hope of discovering my wrongly banished wife."

Having thus spoken, the Duke of Marchmont put on his hat and rushed forth from the mansion. As he descended the steps, his favourite dog — a great bull-mastiff, which has been before alluded to — came leaping up in joy at beholding its master.

"Come, Pluto," exclaimed the duke. "You seem to understand, faithful dog, that I am bent on something of importance."

Meanwhile the word had been passed rapidly through the mansion that, by some means or another, the duke had become convinced of the innocence of the duchess, that her Grace was to be sought out, and that a hundred guineas would be the reward of him who might discover her retreat.

To no hearts did this announcement carry a more real joy than to those of the two lady's-maids; and Jane, embracing her fellow servant, murmured, with tears of happiness streaming down her cheeks, " She will return to us, — our beloved mistress will return to us. God forgive me for having suspected her."

All the male servants of the household sallied forth, and dispersed themselves about in every direction, in search of the duchess. Lord Clandon likewise hastened on the mission, vowing that he would add fifty guineas to the sum already promised by his uncle as the reward of the successful searcher.

The shades of evening had already begun to gather over the earth before this expedition was undertaken, but when night came, the moon appeared upon the canopy of heaven, in company with myriads of glimmering stars. Hours passed, but no one returned from the search until after midnight. Then, one by one, the domestics began to reappear at Oaklands, and each successive arrival was accompanied by the announcement of non-success. It was near one o'clock in the morning when Lord Clandon came back; he likewise had to intimate failure. He inquired for the duke, but his Grace had not yet reappeared, and Lord Clandon resolved to sit up for his return.

It was one o'clock when the Duke of Marchmont, followed by his faithful dog, reached his mansion again. His inquiries had been as fruitless as those of all the others; indeed not the slightest intelligence was obtained by any one relative to the duchess. A horrible idea seemed to pervade the generality of the household, — to the effect that she had committed suicide, but no one ventured to breathe such a surmise to the duke, and it did not appear that he entertained it. Perchance he knew Eliza's natural firmness of character too well, to suspect for a moment that she could have perpetrated self-destruction, especially because, if really innocent, — as he now felt convinced she was, — she would cling to existence in the hope that her guiltlessness might be made apparent and the stain wiped away from her character.

" I shall go forth again," said the duke to his domestics, who were assembled in the hall. " My weary limbs shall not press a couch this night, unless I obtain some clue to the retreat of the duchess."

Then he questioned the domestics, one after the other, as to the particular neighbourhoods in which they had been, and it resulted that there was a little hamlet about two miles distant which was left unvisited.

" Thither will I go," said the duke, hope appearing upon his countenance.

Several of the domestics volunteered to accompany his Grace; while all the others proposed to set off again and renew the search.

" No," said the duke, thanking them all with a look, " you have done enough for to-night. It is my will that you retire to your chambers and seek the rest of which you all stand so much in need. If the morrow should dawn and no good intelligence have been in the interval obtained, we will adopt other means to accomplish our purpose. Go you therefore to your rooms."

" And you, my lord," interjected several voices, " stand in need of rest."

" No," responded the duke, " I could not sleep, even if I sought my couch. I will go forth again. It is I who, alas! have done the mischief; it is my duty to effect its earliest reparation. Retire."

" Lord Clandon is sitting up," suggested one of the servants. " Shall I inform his lordship that your Grace is here? "

" No," responded the duke, imperatively, " I have not time for further discourse. Retire to your chambers, I say, and I will go forth alone."

As he thus spoke, the duke waved his hand in a manner which showed that he meant to be obeyed, though his looks again expressed thankfulness for the sympathy exhibited by his dependents. He went forth, and while the servants for the most part repaired at once to their chambers, others proceeded to secure the doors and shutters previously to seeking their own rooms, while Travers hastened to inform his master, Lord Clandon, of all that the duke had said, for Travers was present in the hall during the brief scene which we have just described.

" His Grace should have suffered me to accompany him," exclaimed Lord Clandon; " he will weary himself to a degree that may bring on illness. But as it is, I shall retire to rest, and see that you call me early, Travers, so that I may get on horseback and renew the search after the duchess."

Travers promised to obey his master's instructions, and having attended Lord Clandon to his chamber, proceeded to his own room a few minutes afterward.

As early as six o'clock in the morning — and therefore after only a few hours' repose — the greater portion of the domestics were up and dressed at Oaklands. Leachley, the duke's valet, reported that his master had not as yet returned, and expressions of uneasiness passed from lip to lip. Several domestics meeting each other in the hall were about to decide in which different directions they should issue forth, — not merely in search of their lost mistress, but now likewise in search of their master also, — when a strange sound, like a low, continuous moaning howl, coming from without, reached their ears. None of the doors of the mansion had as yet been opened; the hall porter, an old man, having sat up so late, had overslept himself. The domestics listened, the sounds continued, and in a few moments they were interrupted by a bark, but low and feeble as the moaning howl itself had been.

"It is a dog," ejaculated one.

"It is Pluto, I am almost certain," cried another.

"Let us get the keys from the porter," exclaimed a third, and a general excitement prevailed, for the idea had arisen simultaneously in every mind that there was something wrong, but what it was, no one could conceive, and no conjecture was volunteered.

The keys were procured from the hall porter's room; the front door was opened, and Pluto crawled painfully into the hall. He was feebly wagging his tail, as if in satisfaction at having thus obtained admittance at last, but he was bloodstained in several places, and his eyes, usually so bright and intelligent, were glazing as if in death. He carried something in his mouth, and on creeping into the hall, he did not sink down, though evidently in an exhausted, if not a dying state, but dragged himself painfully from the feet of one domestic to another. He looked up at each, too, in a sort of piteously entreating manner. It was evident that if the faithful and intelligent animal had the power of speech, he would have told some tale.

"The poor dog has been wounded," ejaculated several voices, and looks of horror were exchanged, for the previous misgiving which had smitten the domestics appeared all in a moment to have strengthened into the conviction that there had been some accident or foul play during the past night, and of which their master was the victim, else wherefore had the dog come back alone?

"But what has he in his mouth?" asked one.

At this moment Lord Clandon, followed by Travers, made his appearance in the hall.

"Good heavens! what is the matter?" he exclaimed, the instant he caught sight of the wounded dog, who now sank down in utter exhaustion, its eyes closing apparently in death. "Where is the duke?" inquired Clandon, as if smitten with the same terrible idea that had already seized upon the domestics.

"Oh, my lord, we know not," responded Leachley, in a mournful voice, "but we dread —"

"What? the duke has not returned," ejaculated Clandon. "Oh, my poor uncle," and he seemed violently affected. "But what is that which has fallen from Pluto's mouth?"

"It is a piece of cloth," said one of the servants, stooping down and picking it up.

"Ah! evidently torn out of a coat," ejaculated another.

"Good heavens, what does all this mean?" exclaimed a third.

"Something dreadful, I fear," added Leachley, with a shudder.

"Disperse yourselves in every direction," exclaimed Lord Clandon, powerfully excited. "I will take horse and gallop along the main roads. Travers — Travers, I say. Why, the fellow was here a few moments back."

Travers was not, however, in the hall at this moment, and Lord Clandon hastened up to his own chamber, where he found his valet.

The orders he had given to the servants were promptly obeyed, for they scattered themselves in every direction, some singly, others going two together. A horse was presently saddled for the use of Lord Clandon, who was speedily ready to avail himself of it.

The butler and Leachley, the duke's own valet, went together on the exciting expedition, and they took the road leading to that hamlet which the duke had set out to visit, as he had stated to the domestics in the middle of the night. It was, as already stated, two miles distant from the mansion, but Leachley and the butler had not proceeded above a few hundred yards, when they heard a dragging noise and a panting, gasping, moaning sound behind. They turned, and beheld the wounded dog. The poor animal, having been forgotten in the hall when the domestics dispersed in such excitement at Lord Clandon's bidding, had dragged himself forth, for he was not quite so near death as his exhausted condition and glazing eyes had seemed to indicate.

"Poor Pluto," said Leachley, caressing the faithful dog.

"See how he looks up," exclaimed the butler, "as if asking us to come on."

"Yes, there is some meaning in those eyes, in those half-moaning, half-howling sounds."

"Let us speed onward," said the butler.

The dog now kept in advance; it appeared as if he acquired strength as he went on, as if he were conscious of having some special task to perform, for which all his best energies were put forth. But still continued that prolonged wailing howl, — that lugubrious moan which sounded ominous as a death-knell itself on the ears of the butler and Leachley.

On they went, and in proportion as they advanced, Pluto's pace quickened, his moan became more rueful, he kept looking up at the two domestics, as if entreating them to follow on still and not go back. They themselves experienced the appalled sense of men who felt that every step they took was bringing them nearer and nearer to the solution of some horrible mystery. Presently Pluto dashed forward, around a bend in the road, looked back for an instant to see whether the men were following him, and then disappeared from their view.

But a few instants brought the butler and Leachley around that bend, and they at once descried a dark object on the edge of a pond by the roadside. Pluto, moaning and whining with all the plaintiveness of a human voice, was crouching near that object. A few instants more, and the two domestics reached the spot. Then what a frightful spectacle met their view. Their master, the Duke of Marchmont, lay dead before their eyes, — foully murdered. A dagger, with which the deed was accomplished, remained between the shoulders, where it had been driven deep down. The unfortunate nobleman lay upon his face on the edge of the pond, into the stagnant water of which one of his arms hung down.

For a few moments the butler and Leachley were so horrified at this frightful spectacle that they were riveted in powerlessness to the spot, but recovering their self-possession after a brief interval, they raised the corpse. Life was extinct; the duke's countenance was cold as marble. He had evidently been several hours dead.

" Alas, he is no more! " murmured Leachley, tears starting from his eyes.

" No more," added the butler, solemnly, and they gently laid the corpse down again.

And now followed a most affecting scene. The faithful dog had seemed to watch the countenances of the two men, while they raised and sustained the corpse between them, as if the animal itself entertained some instinctive hope that they might be enabled to recall their master to life. But when their looks told the worst, and those brief sentences were exchanged, Pluto gave one long, low, whining moan, — a subdued, lugubrious death-howl, — and sank down dead by the side of the corpse.

This incident called forth fresh tears from the eyes of the two domestics. In a few minutes — after having surveyed the scene in mournful silence — Leachley drew forth the dagger, and wrapped it up in his pocket-handkerchief. Scarcely was this done, when the quick tramplings of a galloping horse reached their ears, and in a few moments Lord Clandon was upon the spot.

" Good heavens! " he exclaimed, throwing himself from the horse, and sinking upon his knees by the side of the corpse. " My poor uncle! What fatal accident — "

" Murder, my lord," said the butler, — " a foul and diabolical murder."

" Murder," echoed Clandon, starting up with horror depicted on his countenance. " But I behold no wound," for the corpse was now lying on its back.

" Here, my lord," said Leachley, " is the fatal weapon," and he produced the dagger from his kerchief.

" Bertram's," cried Clandon, the instant his looks fell upon it.

" Mr. Bertram's? " ejaculated both of the domestics, with a simultaneous start of indescribable horror.

"Did I say Bertram's?" exclaimed Clandon. "No, no, I recall the word — Not for worlds would I impute — No, no, I did not say Bertram's."

The two domestics exchanged looks of continued horror, but now blended with dismay and grief, for they both felt that Lord Clandon, having in the suddenness of agonized amazement let drop his brother's name in connection with the dagger, was now generously seeking to recall the word, so as to save that brother from the dread imputation and its consequences.

"I will ride back to the house," said his lordship, "and procure assistance. But no, I should fall from the steed. I have not strength. Go, one of you. It is my duty to remain here, and watch over the corpse of my poor uncle."

Leachley, the deceased nobleman's valet, accordingly mounted the horse, and sped back to the mansion. Most of the male domestics were abroad, searching for their master and mistress, but some few, who had overslept themselves, were still at the house, and of course all the female servants were there. The intelligence which Leachley brought was but too well calculated to overwhelm all who heard it with consternation and grief. A carriage was speedily gotten in readiness, and Leachley accompanied it back to the spot, where Lord Clandon and the butler had remained in charge of the corpse. This was now placed inside the vehicle, which returned at a mourning pace with its sad burden to the mansion. It was not till the lapse of some hours that the domestics who had been on the search — including Travers, Lord Clandon's valet — came back to the mansion, and as they returned one by one, it was to hear the afflicting intelligence of the duke's murder. We should not omit to observe that the remains of poor Pluto were likewise taken to the mansion, and when a veterinary surgeon had examined into the exact nature of the wound of which the faithful animal had died, the body was buried in the garden in the midst of a parterre of flowers.

On the following day the county coroner arrived at Oaklands, to hold an inquest over the corpse of the deceased duke. A jury, consisting of tenant farmers and of the principal householders of the village, was summoned for the occasion. The butler and Leachley deposed to the discovery of the corpse by the side of the pond. The dagger was produced, and Leachley — being a conscientious man, and determined to do his duty, no matter at what sacrifice of his own feelings and those of others — mentioned the circumstance of Lord Clandon's ejaculation of his brother's name the instant the fatal weapon met his eyes. The story in respect to the duchess and Bertram had already got wind throughout the entire district; and thus the coroner and jury, in their own minds, naturally beheld in those incidents enough to strengthen the suspicion that the duke's younger nephew was indeed the assassin.

Lord Clandon — or, as we ought now properly to style him, the Duke of Marchmont, for such indeed had his uncle's death made him — was compelled to appear before the coroner. He entered the room where the inquest was held, with a deep sadness upon his countenance, and for the first few minutes his sobs were plainly audible. The coroner expressed for himself and the jury the grief which was experienced at enforcing his Grace's attendance under such distressing circumstances, but they intimated that they had a duty to perform, and that it must be accomplished.

The oath being administered to the new Duke of Marchmont the coroner said, " I am about to put a question which, however painful it may be, your Grace is bound to answer on the sanctity of the oath you have just taken. Does your Grace know to whom this weapon belongs? "

" Am I indeed bound to answer such a question? " inquired Hugh, and he appeared to speak with the greatest difficulty, so that all present compassionated his afflicting position.

" Your Grace must answer," said the coroner.

" Then if it be so," returned the Duke of Marchmont, in a scarcely audible voice, " I do know that the dagger was the property of — of my unfor— my brother."

" Whose Christian name is Bertram? " said the coroner, interrogatively.

The Duke of Marchmont bowed, groaned audibly, and covered his countenance with his hands.

" When, my lord," inquired the coroner, after a pause, " did you last see your brother? "

" In the evening of the day before yesterday," responded the duke, " in the village of Oaklands."

" And in what state of mind was he at the time, my lord? " asked the coroner.

" He was much excited," responded the duke, " for circumstances had occurred — But doubtless the rumour has reached your ears? My poor brother protested his innocence — "

" And did your Grace leave him in the village? " asked the coroner.

" No," returned Hugh. " I sought to comfort and console him, but when he learned that the duchess had left the mansion, he burst away from me in a sort of frenzy. Oh, I fear that his brain was turned — that madness had seized upon it. But still — still I cannot bring myself to think for a moment that he would have been guilty of this crime."

" We shall not trouble your Grace any farther," said the coroner.

The Duke of Marchmont rose from his seat, bowed to the assemblage, and passed slowly from the room, followed by the sincerest sympathies of all present.

The landlord of the village inn was next examined as a witness. He deposed to the fact of Bertram having passed about three hours at the tavern in the afternoon and evening of the day preceding the night of the murder, that he was violently excited the whole time, and that he had rushed away in the frenzied state of which his brother had just spoken. Two of the housemaids belonging to the mansion were next examined in succession, and their statement was to the effect that while arranging the chamber occupied by Bertram during his stay at Oaklands, they had seen the dagger lying amongst a few other curiosities, which, as they understood, Bertram had brought with him from the United States. The man servant who had especially attended upon Bertram during his visit was the next witness, and he deposed to the fact that Bertram had shown him the dagger, explaining at the time that it had been long in the possession of some celebrated Indian chief who died a few months previous to Bertram's departure from Washington. The dagger, we should observe, was of very peculiar workmanship, and once seen, could not possibly have been mistaken.

Witnesses were now examined to relate the particulars in respect to the dog. It had been found that Pluto was mortally wounded by a pistol-bullet, but the weapon itself had not been found, either in the pond or in the neighbourhood, so that it was tolerably evident the assassin had taken it away with him. The cloth which the dog had brought in his mouth was a fragment evidently torn from the skirt of a surtout coat, and it was therefore supposed that the faithful animal had flown at the murderer of his master, in doing which he had received the fatal bullet. It was further shown that Bertram had on a black surtout coat when he left Oaklands after the scene with the duke and Eliza.

The evidence being now complete, the coroner proceeded to sum up. In alluding to the circumstance of the dagger, he said that it had been incontestably proved that the weapon belonged to Bertram, and that the jury, with this fact before them, would have to weigh well whether, under all the circumstances, it was Bertram's hand which committed the deed, or whether some other person had obtained possession of that dagger with the foulest of purposes. The coroner remarked that it was certainly extraordinary that Bertram should have had the dagger about him at the time when he was walking with the duchess and when the incident occurred that compelled him to fly from Oaklands. None of the witnesses had been able to throw any light upon this point, such for instance as proving that the dagger was still in Bertram's room at the time of his flight, or on the other hand, that they missed it from the room. Certain it was the dagger had dealt the murderous blow, and it was for the jury to say whether the hand of Bertram or that of an unknown assassin had wielded the weapon. Having commented upon all other parts of the evidence, the coroner left the matter in the hands of the jury.

The deliberation was not long, and its unanimous result was a verdict of "Wilful murder against Bertram Vivian, now Lord Clandon."

When the tragic circumstances which thus occurred at Oaklands became spread abroad over the United Kingdom by means of the public journals, the usual excitement lasted for a time and then began to die away. Warrants were issued for Bertram's apprehension, a reward was offered by the Secretary of State, advertisements were inserted in the newspapers, but all to no effect: the accused was not to be found. And Eliza? Nothing was heard of her. The natural inference, therefore, was that Bertram and the

Duchess of Marchmont had fled together to some far distant clime, — there to enjoy their illicit love and to escape, the one from the odium, and the other from the consequences of the fearful deed of turpitude which had been committed.

CHAPTER X

DUCAL RECEPTIONS

Eighteen years (within a few months) had elapsed since the tragic occurrences at Oaklands, — eighteen years, during which not the slightest intelligence had ever been received of the accused Bertram and the missing Eliza.

Hugh, Duke of Marchmont, was now in his forty-third year, and that interval had necessarily made some change in his personal appearance. His hair, of such jetty darkness when we first introduced him to our readers, was now undergoing its first change toward gray; harsh lines, telling of strong passions and of somewhat irregular pursuits, were traced upon his forehead and in the corners of his eyes. His countenance was thin and pale, his features had grown angular, but their expression was that of a cold, haughty severity.

He had married about two years after the tragedy at Oaklands suddenly put him in possession of the title and estates of Marchmont, but no issue had blessed the union. The lady whom the duke had espoused was a young creature of only sixteen at the time of the marriage, and fifteen years having elapsed since the solemnization of those nuptials, she was consequently now thirty-one. For some time the duke had earnestly hoped to have an heir to his title and possessions, but as year after year passed and the hope remained unfulfilled, Hugh gradually conceived an aversion toward his young and beautiful wife. This aversion did not at first display itself in any overt acts toward the duchess, but in proportion as it increased, the duke grew all the less careful in concealing it, until the unfortunate duchess could no longer blind herself to the growing indifference of her husband, — an indifference that was merging into downright hate. At last the Duke of Marchmont separated so far from his wife that they occupied distinct rooms, though still continuing to live beneath the same roof, and preserving, when in society and before the world, all the outward decencies which husband and wife are bound to maintain toward each other. The duchess was not the less virtually and in reality neglected, — the duke seldom dining at home, but seeking his own pleasures in quarters that were most agreeable to him. Though he had been extravagant and improvident in the earlier part of his life, and was indeed overwhelmed with debts at the period he succeeded to the title and domains of Marchmont, he had, since that accession, lived within his income, but then his income was ample enough to minister to all the wants and wishes of even the most pleasure-seeking individual.

The town-mansion occupied by the Duke and Duchess of Marchmont was one of the handsomest and most extensive in Belgrave Square. It had lately been refurnished in a sumptuous manner. The picture-gallery contained some of the finest works of the old masters; all the appointments of the palatial residence were indicative of great wealth and a luxurious taste. Throughout the entire arrangements the voice of the duke himself was autocratic, the duchess not being allowed to interfere. Neither did she seek to do so; her disposition was gentle, meek, and submissive; her lot was an unhappy one, but she endeavoured to bear it with all becoming resignation, and sedulously avoided the aggravation of its hardship by any manifestation of a will of her own in opposition to that of her imperious husband.

It was in the beginning of June, 1847, that the scene occurred which we are about to narrate. The timepiece in one of the elegantly furnished apartments at Marchmont House had just proclaimed the hour of noon, and the duke, who was alone there, laid aside the newspaper which he had been reading. He was sitting, or, rather, lounging upon a sofa; his person was wrapped in a handsome silk dressing-gown of a rich pattern, with a cord tied loosely around the waist. He was thinking of the recreations he had proposed to himself and the appointments which he had for that day, when a footman entered the room, announcing " Mr. Armytage."

An expression of annoyance swept for a moment over the countenance of the Duke of Marchmont, but it rapidly passed away, as if suppressed by his own strong will, because he did not choose to display it to the individual who was thus ushered into his presence. This individual was a man of about fifty, of middle stature, somewhat inclined to corpulency, and with a countenance that was far from prepossessing. It had a mean, cunning look, — an expression of cold, worldly-minded calculation, which evinced selfishness, love of gain, petty ambitions, and other low, debasing feelings. Yet there was a certain gentility of manner about this person, — a gentility, however, which to the eye of a well-bred observer would seem to have been picked up from contact with his betters, rather than to be naturally his own. He was dressed with some degree of pretension, and at all events looked like a well-to-do individual in comfortable circumstances.

Advancing into the room, Mr. Armytage bowed, with a certain commingling of familiarity and respect, to the Duke of Marchmont, who, without rising from his seat, merely nodded his head, and indicating a chair, inquired, " Well, Armytage, what has brought you hither this morning? "

" I come to consult your Grace," replied the visitor, " on a certain family matter which I have very much at heart, and on which I have been thinking for some little time past, so that at length I resolved to address myself to your lordship."

" A family matter? " ejaculated the Duke of Marchmont, in evident surprise. " What the deuce can you mean? This is the first time you ever thought of consulting me on such a subject, and really, Mr. Armytage, I should fancy that with your shrewdness you are the best possible person in the world to manage your own affairs."

" But sometimes, my lord duke," rejoined Armytage, " the best manager requires the assistance of — of — " he was evidently about to say " a friend," but he substituted the term " an adviser."

" Well, then, proceed," exclaimed the duke, " for it is past midday, and I am not yet dressed to go out."

" Your Grace is aware," proceeded Armytage, " that my daughter Zoe is now in her twentieth year — "

" Ah! is she so old as that? " said the duke, listlessly. " But as you are aware, I have seen her so seldom."

" It is perfectly true," replied Mr. Armytage, accentuating his words into the significancy of a reproach, " that your Grace seldom condescends to appear at my parties, and it is unfortunate that on several occasions for the last two or three years, when I solicited your Grace's presence, you always had prior engagements."

" Well, Armytage, that was not my fault, you know," responded Marchmont. " But about Miss Zoe? You were speaking of her. She is a very beautiful girl — "

" And I flatter myself, my lord," interjected Armytage, " that she is well brought up. I have spared no expense on her education and accomplishments."

" I recollect that she plays and sings admirably," said the duke. " But now, pray come to the purpose."

" I will explain myself in as few words as possible," continued Mr. Armytage. " Your Grace is aware that my poor wife, Zoe's mother, died when she was young, and it therefore devolved upon me to superintend my daughter's training and rearing. I am therefore proud of her, not merely as the personification of feminine beauty and accomplishments, but likewise as a specimen of my own good taste. I mean that the developments of her intellect do credit to the presiding influence — "

" Really, Armytage, you might leave others to sing your praises," interrupted the duke, somewhat impatiently. " What in the devil's name is the use of your talking all this nonsense to me? Let it be taken for granted that your daughter is all you represent, and now tell me what service I can render you, for it is a service, I see plainly enough, that you have come to ask."

" My lord, I am solicitous for the welfare of my beloved and only child," returned Armytage. " To speak the truth with frankness, I have given the most brilliant parties ever since she came out, in the hope of procuring for her a suitable alliance. Several young noblemen are happy enough to feast themselves at my table and to flirt in my drawing-rooms, but, my lord, as yet not one — "

" Has paid his suit to your daughter," said the duke, anticipating his visitor's meaning. " But what would you have me do? You don't for a minute imagine that I have it in my power to find a patrician husband for your daughter? "

" On the contrary, my lord, it is precisely what I do mean," said Mr. Armytage, " and I will tell you how. Your Grace is intimately acquainted with all those young noblemen who visit me — "

" No doubt," interjected Marchmont, " because it was through me that you became acquainted with them."

" Precisely so, my lord," said Mr. Armytage. " They are your Grace's companions and friends, you meet them at your club, you ride with them, they visit you at your country-seats and at your shooting-box, they dine at your table, they are satellites revolving around your Grace as their central sun."

" Well, Armytage, and to what is all this to lead? " inquired the duke.

" Simply to this, my lord, — that you have it in your power to hint to these noblemen that Mr. Armytage is a wealthy man, — a very wealthy man, — that by successful speculations he has amassed a considerable fortune — "

" The young noblemen to whom you allude are aware of this already," observed the duke.

" Yes, my lord, but they are not aware that I will give my daughter sixty thousand pounds on her wedding-day. Of course this is an announcement which I cannot blazon forth from the head of my dinner-table, nor in the midst of my drawing-room. Your Grace, however, can bring up the conversation, as if quite in an indifferent manner, and whatsoever hint your lordship may throw out in respect to my means and intentions of providing for my daughter will assume for those who hear it the shape of a recommendation to reflect seriously thereon. If the attention of the young noblemen to whom we are alluding be once settled on that particular point — "

" Your aim will be soon accomplished, you think? " added the duke. " Well, it may be so. But do you reflect, Armytage, that these young noblemen are for the most part younger sons, without much means of their own? "

" What matters their means," ejaculated Armytage, " when I possess ample? I would sooner bestow my daughter on a nobleman without a shilling than on the richest commoner in all England."

" Really, if this be your game," observed the Duke of

Marchmont, "I do not think it can be a very difficult one to be carried out successfully."

"Certainly not, if your Grace will only succour me to the extent I have been explaining," said Mr. Armytage. "May I rely — "

"Yes, certainly," responded the duke. "I will take the very earliest opportunity of giving the hint which you have suggested. But what will Miss Zoe herself say if some fine morning you bid her receive the attentions of one whom she does not love?"

"Zoe, my lord, as a dutiful, an affectionate, and an obedient daughter," rejoined Mr. Armytage, sententiously, "will follow her father's advice in all things."

"And suppose that the whole is brought about according to your wishes," said the duke, "you will not eventually throw upon me the blame of any mishaps that may arise, — the squandering, for instance, of your daughter's dowry by the husband whom she may thus obtain — "

"I, my lord, will take care of all that in the marriage settlements," replied Armytage, quickly. "Suppose, for argument sake, that the noble suitor whom I seek for my daughter should be hampered with debts. To a reasonable amount I will liquidate them, and I will guarantee a liberal income — say a thousand a year — for pocket-money and so forth, for my son-in-law. This, with the interest of my daughter's sixty thousand pounds, will yield a sufficient revenue, and the young people will have the prospect of double at my death. Is not this fair, my lord?"

"It is at least explicit," responded the duke, "and as I see that you are so perseveringly bent on marrying your daughter to almost any one, so long as he possesses a title of nobility, I will, as already promised, do my best to help you in the matter."

"For this favour, and for all past ones, my lord," said Armytage, rising from his seat, "I beg to proffer my sincerest thanks."

He then bowed in the same half-respectful, half-familiar manner as before, and quitted the room. As the door closed behind him, a sneering expression of contempt appeared upon the countenance of the Duke of Marchmont, but it was promptly succeeded by a darker scowl of anger and annoyance, at having been thus selected to play the ignominious part of a sort of helper-on for the ambitious schemings of the parvenu speculator, Mr. Armytage.

A few minutes after the departure of Mr. Armytage, and just as the Duke of Marchmont was about to proceed to his chamber to dress for going out, the door was again opened, and the footman announced Lord Octavian Meredith.

This was a young nobleman barely twenty-two years of age, exceedingly handsome, and of elegant appearance. He was not much above the average height, but his slenderness of shape and perfect symmetry of figure made him look taller than he really was. His hair, curling naturally, and worn somewhat profusely, was brown, but by no means of the darkest shade; his whiskers and a slight moustache added to the manliness of an otherwise youthful countenance. His features were in the Grecian style; his eyes, of dark blue, had all the clearness and brightness proper for the reflection of a soul naturally frank, candid, and generous. His manners were those of the polished gentleman, with the slightest possible tincture of a dissipated languor, but without a real affectation. His voice was singularly pleasing, its tones rich and harmonious, and his conversation, which might be intellectual enough when he thought fit to render it so, received additional attractions from that melody of the voice. He was the youngest of the three sons of the Marquis of Penshurst. The marquis himself was very rich, but excessively mean and parsimonious. The estates were strictly entailed upon his eldest son. The second son, though only six and twenty years of age, was a lieutenant-colonel in the army; Octavian, the youngest of the three, and of whom we are specially speaking, had been intended for the Church, but for reasons which we will proceed to explain, he had renounced all thought of entering holy orders, nor had he indeed any profession at all.

Lord Octavian Meredith was naturally a well-principled young man, with a high sense of honour, and endowed with every ennobling sentiment as well as intellectual quality calculated to make him shine in the world. But he had been sent to college with a limited income, and yet, as the son of a marquis, and himself bearing a patrician title, he was expected to keep up a certain appearance. All young men have their pride in these respects, and this pride frequently overrules their better feelings. Parents should be particularly cautious to guard against the possibility of their children's good principles being assailed through the weak point of their pride, for no point is more vulnerable. Octavian found himself at college without adequate means to keep up a becoming appearance. He got into debt, and his sense of honour prompted him to meet his engagements according to the punctuality that was promised. He wrote to his father, frankly and candidly explaining his position. The marquis, instead of treating his son with a kind consideration, sent his lawyer to Oxford to offer a composition to the creditors. The tradesmen remonstrated; the lawyer shrugged his shoulders, and told them they might do as they liked, but that they had better take what he offered than stand the chance of getting nothing at all, for that the Marquis of Penshurst was determined not to suffer his son, while a minor, to be fleeced by those who recklessly gave him credit. The tradesmen accepted the composition, and they were given to understand that no further debts contracted by Lord Octavian would be thus settled. Octavian was relieved from his embarrassments, but his position was ruined at the university. He obtained the nickname of "the Bankrupt Lord." The wealthiest of his companions cut him direct; the poorest looked coldly upon him. His situation became intolerable; he wrote to his father to beseech that he might be allowed to choose some other profession than that of the Church; the marquis was obstinate in his refusal, and Lord Octavian left the university in humiliation and disgust.

His father refused to see him for some time, and at last when he consented, he upbraided the young man so bitterly and treated him with so much harshness that Octavian's home became as intolerable as his situation was at Oxford. In a few months' time he attained his twenty-first year, and he then requested his father to make him a fixed allowance. The penurious old marquis sternly refused; his tyranny increased toward Octavian, who, it must in justice be said, did all he possibly could to merit a renewal of the paternal confidence. His mother had long been dead; otherwise he would have found a kind and considerate mediatrix in her. In short, it became impossible for him to tarry beneath his father's roof, and through the intervention of a distant relative who happened to have some influence with the marquis, Octavian procured an allowance of five hundred a year. Before he left home, he besought the marquis to use his interest to get him a commission in the army, or to launch him into the sphere of diplomacy, but the old nobleman could not forget that his original plans on behalf of his youngest son had been thwarted by his withdrawal from the university, and faithful to his churlish nature, he positively refused to do anything more for him.

Octavian accordingly quitted the paternal home, and took lodgings. He was but little past his majority, and his experiences of life were hitherto bitter enough. His spirit had been chafed, his feelings wounded, his hopes disappointed; he had the will, and he felt that he had the intelligence, to enter upon some career in which he might distinguish himself and carve out his own fortunes, but the opportunity had been denied him. This was indeed a bad beginning for a young man just entering upon the world, sufficient to demoralize him completely, render him indifferent to the good principles which had hitherto for the most part guided him, and prepare the way for his eventual ruin. Octavian did not entirely escape the ill effects of those inauspicious circumstances. On taking lodgings, he was launched as it were upon the town, and his companions were men in his own sphere of life. He became a favourite with them; his obliging disposition, his polished manners, and his natural intelligence rendered him a desirable guest at their tables, while his own limited means compelled him to accept all these hospitalities as the only condition on which he could obtain any society at all.

He was introduced to the Duke of Marchmont, who, from the way in which he was situated with his wife, was fond of giving bachelor dinner-parties and of being surrounded with a number of gay, lively young men, as the reader might have gathered from certain remarks made by Mr. Armytage. Thrown into the midst of this society, Octavian gradually found himself being drawn deeper and deeper into the vortex of dissipation. He kept out of debt, but he could not avoid keeping late hours and joining in the pleasures which his companions courted. To abstract himself from their company at an early hour when what they called "the joviality of the evening" was only just beginning, or to decline forming one of whatsoever party of pleasure might be in contemplation, would be to seal his own exclusion from those circles in future. What was Octavian to do? He felt that he was entering upon a dangerous career, and that his naturally good principles were already receiving certain shocks, each successive one being accompanied with less remorseful feelings than the former, and he yearned to escape from these evil influences. But how was he to do so? His mind, having been chafed and disappointed, was too unsettled and restless to enable him to sit down quietly in the midst of books, and it was not to be expected that a young man just entering into life would fly to some distant seclusion and turn hermit. On every occasion when invited to dine with the Duke of Marchmont or any other of his friends, Octavian would hesitate what answer to send; he trembled to go, yet knew not how to refuse, and so he went, vowing it should be for the last time. But these "last times" really never reached the end, nor fulfilled their own meaning, and thus Lord Octavian Meredith — with the highest aspirations, and the best capacities for doing himself good — was being gradually and imperceptibly sucked into that vortex of dissipation which London life affords, and in which many a fine spirit, noble intellect, and magnanimous heart is wrecked and engulfed.

It has been necessary to give the reader this long description of a young nobleman who is destined to play no inconsiderable part upon the stage of our story, and he it now was who was ushered into the Duke of Marchmont's presence soon after Mr. Armytage had taken his departure.

"The very one whom at the instant I most longed to see," exclaimed the duke, cordially grasping Octavian's hand. "I was thinking of going for a good long ride, for to tell you the truth, I drank somewhat too much champagne last night — By the bye, you were not one of us at Lord Oxenden's?"

"No, I was at a party at Mr. Armytage's," replied Meredith.

"Ah! Armytage has just been here," said the duke.

"I saw him driving away in his carriage," observed Octavian, "and bowed to him. But I wish, my dear duke, you could give me half an hour of serious conversation, and then I will cheerfully accompany you in a ride."

"Serious conversation, my dear Meredith?" ejaculated

Marchmont, with a laugh. "Are you really disposed to be serious? Come, shall we have luncheon? A glass of hock and some soda-water will do us good."

"Not now, I pray you," responded Meredith. "Give me the half-hour, and then I am at your bidding."

"Be it so, — the half-hour of serious discourse," said the duke, and he stretched himself indolently upon the sofa. "Now, Octavian, proceed; I am all attention."

"You know, my dear duke," resumed the young nobleman, "how I am situated with my father — "

"Now, I will cut you short at once," interrupted Marchmont. "You have temporary need of a sum of money? Tell me without another word how much it is, and my cheque-book is at hand."

"No, my dear duke, it is not that," replied Meredith, his looks expressing his gratitude for the offer. "Nevertheless, I did come to solicit a favour at your hands. It is that you will use your interest to procure me a diplomatic post. I have an inclination to go abroad — "

"Ridiculous, Octavian," exclaimed the duke; "we cannot spare you from amongst our own set. But seriously speaking, my dear friend, I have not the slightest interest with the present Ministry. You know that I belong to the good old school of Toryism; I always vote against the government on principle, and if there were a shoeblack's situation to be given away, I might vainly ask for even so paltry a post for a nominee of my own."

"I feared that it would be so," observed Octavian, his handsome countenance becoming deeply overshadowed, and sorrow clouding his clear blue eyes.

"But what means this sudden resolve on your part?" inquired Marchmont, — "this anxiety to get abroad?"

"You have treated me with so much kindness, I will be frank with you," answered Octavian. "My means are limited, I am dependent on my father's caprice, I have no profession, no position, and I long to improve my circumstances in every respect."

"I understand," said the duke, "and it is natural enough. But, ah, my dear fellow, a thought strikes me! You know I do not flatter, but a young nobleman of your personal appearance, fine intellect, fascinating manners — You should marry."

"Ah, marry!" said Octavian, with an ill-repressed sigh. "I have no fortune, and what father will consent to bestow his daughter, if she be an heiress, upon one so impoverished as I?"

"You underrate your own merits," observed the Duke of Marchmont. "In matrimonial affairs there are such things as equivalents. Suppose, for instance, a young lady brings you a decent fortune, and you confer upon her the rank and title which she possesses not — "

"I know that things are managed in this way," observed Octavian, slowly, "but to tell you the truth, it is a proceeding from which my pride recoils."

"Pride," echoed the duke. "The only sacrifice of pride that I can see would be in the fact of you, a patrician, giving your hand to a plebeian."

"You of all men to talk in this way," exclaimed Meredith, in unfeigned astonishment.

"Ah! you fancy that I am the proudest of the proud?" observed the duke. "But I am looking to your interests — "

"And I candidly confess that the sacrifice of pride to which I alluded is not precisely what you are thinking of. I meant to say," continued Lord Octavian, "that I should not like to be so much indebted to a wife for the enjoyment of a fortune. As for the distinctions between patricians and plebeians, you know very well that I am not such a Tory as yourself."

"Let us recur to my argument about equivalents," said the duke. "If you give a title, and the lady brings a fortune, you make common stock of those elements which constitute social position and comfort; you are mutually indebted, and in that respect you stand on perfectly independent grounds toward each other."

"Admitting the force of your argument," observed Meredith, — "and supposing that I fell in with some young lady who, possessing a fortune, would accept me as her husband, — how could I tutor my heart to love her? And how could I marry her unless it did?"

"Oh, if you mean to throw love into the scale," ejaculated the duke, almost contemptuously, "I must retreat from the argument. I only undertake to advise you how to obtain a settled position; I cannot compose philters that will engender love. Perhaps, my dear Meredith, you love already?"

"I know not," responded Octavian, with some degree of confusion. "And yet methinks that the image of one whom I have seen — on two or three occasions — is often present to my fancy —"

"And pray who is this fair being to whom you allude?" asked the duke, "for of course she must be fair, thus to have made an impression on your heart."

"She is the loveliest girl I ever beheld in my life," ejaculated Octavian, with an enthusiasm which he could not at the moment repress, but which when thus given way to left him overwhelmed with confusion.

"But who is she?" inquired Marchmont. "You may tell me; I never interfere treacherously with my friends' love-affairs."

"I would tell you cheerfully, but I myself do not know," responded Octavian. "I have seen her on two or three occasions, walking with a youth whom by the likeness I know to be her brother —"

"Then you have never spoken to her?" asked the duke.

"Never," replied Meredith. "She is as modest as she is beautiful, and I do not think that she even so much as noticed that she was on those occasions the object of my interested regards. No, she is virgin bashfulness itself."

"And to what sphere of life does your unknown fair one belong? Ah, by that telltale blush I see she is beneath your aspirations, or, rather, beneath what they ought to be."

"This brother and sister of whom I am speaking," replied Octavian, in a serious tone, "are evidently respectable —"

"Respectable, but not rich?" exclaimed the duke. "Perhaps tradesman's children, or something of that sort? Now, my dear friend, renounce this phantasy of yours as speedily as ever you can."

"Yes, I must, I must," said Octavian, quickly, and with some degree of emotion. "It is useless to cherish a dream, — madness, in my position, to cradle myself in a delusion."

"The fact is," resumed Marchmont, "that if you fancied an obscure girl ever so fondly and passionately, — I mean in a virtuous sense, — you could not afford to love her. Your circumstances will not permit you. You must marry, Octavian, according to the counsel which I have given you.

It may seem repulsive at first, but the longer you think of it, the more palatable will my plan appear. Get a position, by all means; make yourself truly independent of your father, and of your elder brother after him. There are heiresses who would jump at an offer from a good-looking young man with the title of lord prefixed to his name. What say you, Meredith?"

"It is something to be thought over," replied the young nobleman, and then he added, slowly, "If I did form such an alliance, I would do my duty toward my wife. I would surround her with attentions, even if I could not bring my heart to love her with sincerity. But where are such heiresses to be looked for?"

"Where?" said the duke, apparently in a careless manner. "Oh, that is your business! I have given you the counsel; it is now for you — But, ah, when I bethink me, there is the daughter of that very gentleman we spoke of just now."

"Who?" inquired Octavian.

"Armytage," was the duke's response. "Do you know, my good fellow, that Armytage is a very wealthy man, and that his daughter's dowry will be sixty thousand pounds on her wedding-day? This I can tell you for a fact. I have known Armytage, as you are aware, for a great number of years; I respect him because he is an upright, honest man, who by his own industry has made himself."

"He was your factor, or steward, or intendant originally, — or something of that sort, — was he not?" inquired Octavian, who had been listening thoughtfully to all that the duke said.

"Yes, something of that sort," responded Marchmont, again relapsing into his manner of seeming carelessness. "He scraped together some money, and I think he had a pretty considerable sum left him by a deceased relative. So he came up to London, launched out in business as a merchant and speculator, and thus made his fortune. You know very well, Octavian, that my antipathies are great in respect to the plebeian money plodders on the other side of Temple Bar, but in this individual instance I have never forgotten that Armytage served me faithfully and honestly, and so I have countenanced him."

"The feeling does you honour, my dear duke," replied

Octavian, warmly, for he believed in its sincerity. "It is all the more honourable, too, inasmuch as it is at the expense of a prejudice."

"And Zoe — Mr. Armytage's daughter — is really a beautiful girl," proceeded the duke, — "elegant, accomplished, and well calculated to shine in any drawing-room. Come, my dear friend, I see that my counsel is not altogether thrown away upon you. We will have lunch now, and then go out for a ride. You can reflect at your leisure upon all that I have been suggesting."

"Yes," murmured Octavian, with another ill-repressed sigh, as he thought of the beautiful unknown whom he had seen on two or three occasions, and whose bashful loveliness had made more or less impression on his heart.

CHAPTER XI

ZOE

In a sumptuously furnished drawing-room, in a house belonging to one of the handsomest terraces in the Regent's Park, a lady was seated. The apartment itself was characterized with splendour more than with elegance; every detail of its appointments was rich and costly, so that the evidences of wealth were assembled together with a profusion more calculated for ostentatious display than consistent with refined taste. The walls were crowded with vast mirrors; the style of the furniture was of scarlet and gold; knickknacks which had cost vast sums were scattered about as ornamental trifles. The room, though spacious, was in point of fact encumbered with its own magnificence, and thus was it divested of that real air of comfort which good taste knows so skilfully how to blend with the dazzling effects of splendour.

Yet amidst all these objects of a grand and gorgeous luxury which were so overwhelmingly heaped together in this drawing-room, there were a few slight evidences of a more correct and refined intellect than that which had presided over the general appointments of the apartment. There were flowers tastefully arranged with a view to the harmonizing of their brilliant colours; music rested upon an open piano, and lay upon a stool near a harp. There was a portfolio upon one of the centre-tables, and this contained several beautiful specimens of drawing, alike in pencil and in water-colour. An elegant piece of embroidery-work, half-finished, lay on the sofa on which sat the fair occupant of this room. The books which were formally arranged upon the tables for mere purposes of show were as trumpery in their contents as they were gorgeous in their binding, but on the sofa, near the embroidery, lay three or four volumes containing the works of the best British poets, and these were in a comparatively common binding. The dress of the young lady herself was simple and neat, in the best possible taste, and therefore in reality characterized with a more real elegance than if it had been of the magnificent style which one would have expected to discern on the part of a female occupant of that sumptuously furnished room. Need we say that it was the refined taste of this lady to which a visitor would feel himself indebted for those little evidences of superior and more intellectual judgment which, few though they were, nevertheless afforded a certain relief to the eye and to the mind, otherwise dazzled and satiated by the presence of all that ostentatious display of wealth?

The lady of whom we are speaking was Zoe, Mr. Armytage's daughter, and the house to which we have introduced the reader was Mr. Armytage's mansion. All the rooms in that house — save two — were furnished with a costliness corresponding to that of the principal apartment; thousands and thousands of pounds must have been lavished in fitting up this gorgeous dwelling. But everywhere throughout the mansion, with the exception of the two rooms to which we have alluded, there was the pervasive indication of the vulgar mind of a parvenu, who, aspiring to move in the best and most brilliant society, fancied that his own plebeian origin and upstart position would be lost sight of in the dazzling splendours by which he was surrounded. The two rooms which formed an exception to the rule were the private apartments of Zoe Armytage herself: namely, her boudoir and her bedchamber. Those she had caused to be fitted up in conformance with her own refined taste, and the simple elegance which characterized these rooms afforded a sufficient proof of what the entire mansion would have been if the same genius had superintended all its appointments.

But now, between three and four o'clock on a certain afternoon, we find Miss Armytage seated in the drawing-room, from the simple fact that this was the visiting hour when "morning calls" might be expected, for in the fashionable world it is always morning until dinner-time, even though the dinner hour be postponed until seven o'clock in the evening. Zoe, however, could not endure the magnificence of that apartment unless it were relieved by the presence of flowers, and unless her time, when she was alone, could be occupied with music, with her pencil, her embroidery, or her favourite authors. The simply bound books, therefore, had accompanied her from the well-chosen little library in her own boudoir, because not for a single instant could she bear to bend over the nauseating trash which filled the gorgeously bound annuals which lay upon the tables.

Miss Armytage was about twenty years of age. Her countenance was an oval of the most faultless outline; she was not merely beautiful, but interesting, and of that sweet, lovable appearance which, apart from mere beauty, renders a young woman so exquisitely charming. Her features were regular and delicately formed: her nose was perfectly straight; her mouth was small, — the lips classically cut, and of scarlet brightness. Her eyes were large and of a clear limpid blue, fringed with dark lashes, and surmounted by brows well separated and finely arched, so that the expression of her countenance was full of frankness and ingenuous innocence. Those lashes and those brows were many shades darker than her hair, which was of a rich light brown, soft and silky, and with so lustrous a gloss upon it that if worn in bands and left somewhat wavy, it seemed golden where the light fell upon it, and dark where the shades remained. But if worn in ringlets, then did a perfect shower of that light brown hair fall in natural curls on either side of this lovely countenance, descending upon well-formed shoulders, and upon a neck pure and stainless as alabaster. There was something inexpressibly sweet in her smile. The purity of her thoughts made her countenance seem the face of an angel, and as her complexion was delicately fair, though with the roseate tint of health upon the cheeks, this transparent purity of the skin added to the angelic style of her loveliness.

Though not tall, — indeed not above the middle height of woman, — her figure nevertheless appeared of a loftier stature on account of its admirable symmetry, its lithe elasticity, and its flowing roundness of contour and of limb. Every movement was characterized by an unstudied grace; every gesture was replete with an elegance all its own. However plebeian her parentage might have been, there were nevertheless all the best unbought graces of a natural aristocracy about this beautiful and charming creature.

Such was Zoe Armytage. But how was it that such a man as he who was introduced to the reader in the preceding chapter could possess such a daughter? Mr. Armytage had risen from next to nothing. He did not mind sometimes boasting amongst his City acquaintances — never amongst his fashionable ones — that he had been the architect of his own fortune, yet he never was known definitely to state what he was in the beginning. He went no farther back than the period when he acted as steward or intendant over the vast estates of the present Duke of Marchmont. However, at the time when Zoe was old enough to begin to receive impressions from the circumstances in which she was placed, her father was already a well-to-do man. Thus, whatever his earliest position might have been, Zoe's recollections went no farther back than to associate themselves with a comfortable, well-furnished home, with servants, and the usual appendages of rapidly increasing prosperity. Her mother had died early, and as she grew up, she perceived, with an understanding beyond her years, that though her father supervised the governess and the preceptors who managed the various departments of her education, he was by no means capable of judiciously exercising such authority. She loved her father, not merely because she was naturally of an affectionate disposition, but likewise because she beheld, or fancied she beheld, in his zealous care on her behalf, a fond, paternal endeavour to indemnify her as much as possible for the loss of her maternal parent. Thus as she grew up she delicately avoided hurting her father's feelings by suffering him to perceive that her own intuitive good taste and naturally delicate appreciation were as pure gold is to dross in comparison with his vulgar, upstart, parvenu notions. While seeming to follow his advice in all her studies, she nevertheless in reality yielded implicit confidence to the sounder judgment and better tastes of the first-rate governess and masters who were engaged in her tuition. The result was that her mind expanded beneath the best possible influences, totally unaffected by that erroneous one which her father sought to shed upon every phase of its development. For if she had listened to him, she would have devoted herself to the fashionable frivolities instead of to the substantialities of education; she would have become fitted only for a mere drawing-room doll, whereas she had turned out an intellectual and truly accomplished young lady.

It may easily be supposed that with a mind so gifted and with an understanding so capacious as Zoe's, she could not have failed to observe the ways in which her father had obtained wealth. She knew him to be one who had speculated — if speculation it could be called — with all that worldly-minded shrewdness which invariably left him a gainer, though the enterprise itself should fail and involve all his confiding associates in ruin. She knew likewise that he lent money to the profligate and the necessitous at a usurious rate, and never without security more or less tangible; she knew that the extravagances of the patrician spendthrift and the embarrassments of the struggling, hard-working, industrious trader had been the sources of no inconsiderable part of his immense fortune. She was aware that he had seen poverty in palaces as well as in prisons, and had penetrated into both with no sympathizing object, but for the mere purpose of availing himself of the proud lord's wants or the poor tradesman's necessities, as the means of aggrandizing his own wealth. All this did Zoe know, and therefore she had a complete reading of her father's heart. She knew that it was not merely hard, because hardness melts, and his heart never melted; that it was not merely cold, because coldness may relax, and his never relaxed; but she knew its utter nothingness in respect to all kindly sentiments when dealing with the world, — its complete impassibility in the pursuance of a career which had simply one aim: namely, money-making.

All this Zoe knew, and yet she loved her father. She would not suffer herself to despise him; she could not possibly hate him. She loved him because she fancied — and in this instance only was her judgment at fault — that all he did for her was the result of a doting fondness on his part. Of this fondness she beheld the evidences in the sums he had spent upon her education, the constant care which he made her take of her health, the visible pride with which he surveyed her in his own sumptuous saloons, the separate equipages he kept for her, the lavish profusion with which he furnished her purse, the rich presents he was continuously making her, the exultation with which he would sometimes hint that she ought to form a brilliant alliance, and the assurance he was constantly giving her that his only object in heaping up wealth was to endow her with those riches. Fine as Zoe's intellect was, and shrewd her understanding, it is nevertheless not to be wondered at if, in her inexperience of the world, and the natural generosity of her heart, she should put the most favourable interpretation upon her father's conduct toward her. But Mr. Armytage did really love his daughter, though it was a love after the fashion of his own sordid soul, — a love that was made up of vulgar pride as much as of any other element. He saw that she was beautiful, and he was proud of her; he heard her accomplishments spoken of, and he flattered himself that for these she was indebted much more to his own supervising judgment than to the fine qualifications of her own intellect or to the proficiency of her governess and preceptors. To her only did he ever speak in accents of fondness; her influence alone could induce him to perform a charitable action, though this he would emblazon with all the flaming hues of his own ostentation. But still Zoe saw how different he was to her than to the rest of the world; she attributed it to a pure paternal fondness, and therefore was it that, with all his faults, she loved her father so tenderly and so well. Little did she think that this father of hers would drag her to the altar and immolate her as the sacrifice to a patrician alliance, rather than suffer her to proceed of her own accord to that altar, to bestow her hand on some plebeian object of her choice, if such choice she should happen to make.

Zoe however had made no such choice. Yet she loved, and who it was that had thus become the object of her affections will be presently seen. He whom she thus loved was as yet totally ignorant that he had made any impression upon the mind of this charming young lady; no one suspected her love, neither her father nor her handmaids. The natural purity of her thoughts, blended with her maidenly dignity, had prevented her from betraying the secret by even the slightest sign whereby the sentiment of love is so often wont to reveal itself. At the time of which we are writing, Zoe's love had not existed many months in her heart, and yet it was already profoundly rooted. It had entertwined itself, so to speak, with every fibre of her being. But it was a love entirely of the sentiment, and not of the sense, — a love which was strictly a sentiment, and not a passion, — a love of that æsthetic character in which the ancient Greeks believed, but the mere mention of which only provokes the sneer of skepticism in this more worldly-minded and practical age. Nor do we ourselves believe that such love is often found. It is the lost paradise of the soul, of which few are now permitted to obtain a glimpse, much less to receive an infusion of its pure and holy light into the sanctuary of their hearts. Yet such a love as that was Zoe's, and she cherished it without ever dreaming of aught beyond. The very idea of its realization would have seemed to her a thought tinctured with grossness, if emanating from herself and not inspired by an avowal on the part of its object.

Having thus sufficiently introduced Miss Armytage to our readers, we may pursue the thread of our narrative. It was, as we have already said, between three and four o'clock in the afternoon that Zoe, having quitted her boudoir, took her seat in the drawing-room to await the presence of any visitor or visitress who might happen to call. Her father had been with her for about half an hour; she had played to him on the piano and the harp, and he had looked over her portfolio of drawings. Not that he had the faintest idea of music, nor the slightest taste in a pictorial or artistic sense, but he chose to affect a very great fondness for those elegant accomplishments in which his daughter excelled, while he cordially detested the course of reading to which she was particularly devoted. He had only left her at the time of which we are writing, to speak to some one on business who had called at the mansion in the Regent's Park, for though he had ostensibly retired from commercial affairs by giving up his counting-house in the City, he nevertheless continued in a sort of private manner his financial enterprises by advancing loans on good security.

Having transacted whatsoever business it was that had called him away, Mr. Armytage returned to the drawing-room, where Zoe in the interval had taken up one of the books which she had brought from the boudoir.

"What are you reading there, my love?" he inquired, leaning over the back of the sofa, which was drawn away from the wall so as to be near one of the centre-tables.

"Cowper's poems," responded Zoe, looking up at her father with a sweet glance, in which there was an amiable deprecation, for she evidently foresaw the observation that would next come from his lips.

"How absurd," he exclaimed, "to waste your time over that sentimental nonsense. And really, Zoe, when there are so many elegantly bound books which you might group about you, I wonder at your having those poor-looking volumes here in the drawing-room."

"I will put them out of sight, dear father," she at once rejoined, "if you object to them," and she hastened to thrust the books under one of the immense velvet cushions bordered with gold fringes and having long tassels likewise of gold.

"If you don't like the tales and poetry in those volumes," continued Mr. Armytage, glancing toward the trumpery works in their splendid binding that lay upon the tables "it is quite fashionable, you know, to have the last new novel lying by your side. I have often begged you, my dear Zoe, to read fashionable novels; they improve the taste, and furnish ideas for conversation in company."

"Really, my dear father," replied Zoe, who however seldom contradicted or remonstrated against the displays of her sire's false notions and vulgar taste in such matters, "I do not think that these fashionable novels of which you speak can in any way afford improvement for the mind or manners, and as for the conversation, Heaven help those who think of drawing their inspirations from such sources!"

Mr. Armytage was about to reply, when an equipage dashed up to the front of the house, and hastening to the window, he exclaimed, "It is my friend the Duke of Marchmont."

He then sat down and took up a book, so that he might have the air of one who did not put himself out of the way for even a ducal visitor, but would receive him with as little excitement and as little fluttering of pride as if he were the humblest of acquaintances. But he was not destined to receive the visit at all on the present occasion, for when one of his footmen — habited, by the bye, in a livery resplendently gorgeous — made his appearance in the drawing-room, it was not to announce the duke, but simply to request Mr. Armytage to step down, as his Grace had a word to say to him but begged to be excused alighting from his carriage as he was in a hurry to keep an appointment elsewhere. For a moment a scowl of displeasure appeared upon the features of Mr. Armytage, as if he felt that he was receiving the treatment of a plebeian at the hands of a patrician immeasurably his superior, but the next moment, as a recollection flashed to his mind, his countenance recovered its wonted cold equanimity, and he sped down-stairs.

" No doubt," he thought to himself, as he thus hastened forth to the duke's carriage, " Marchmont has come to tell me something about the affair I spoke to him of a few days back."

The duke was alone inside the carriage, and as Armytage hurried up to the window, the footman who had descended from behind to knock at the front door stood back a pace or two so as not to have the air of listening to whatsoever might be said.

" I just called to tell you, Armytage," said the duke, in a low voice, " that I have been enabled to manage that little business about which you called on me the other day. What say you to Lord Octavian Meredith, youngest son of the Marquis of Penshurst? "

Mr. Armytage reflected deeply for a few minutes, without making any response.

" The family is a very ancient and a most honourable one," continued the Duke of Marchmont. " Meredith himself is a handsome and elegant young man — "

" But if I mistake not," observed Mr. Armytage, " he is at variance with his relatives, and I would not have my daughter marry into any family where she would stand a chance of being cut, and where I myself should not be a welcome guest."

" Of all this you need entertain no apprehension," rejoined the Duke of Marchmont. " The Marquis of Penshurst is more parsimonious than proud, and depend upon it, he will joyfully receive his son and his son's wife when the latter brings an ample dowry with her on her wedding-day. As for yourself, you have only to lend a few thousand pounds to Lord Meredith, the marquis's eldest son, and to Lord Charles, his second son, both of whom are kept by their father's penuriousness in total want of money, — you have only to do this, I say, in order to receive all possible civility at their hands."

" Yes, your Grace speaks truly," said Mr. Armytage. " As for Octavian Meredith, he is a very nice young man, a son-in-law of whom one might feel proud. But are you sure, my lord — "

" I am sure, Armytage," interrupted the duke, " that I have managed the thing most capitally for you. Meredith furnished me an opportunity the other day of counselling him relative to his affairs; indeed it was the very same day on which you yourself called, and I have had him with me every day since. You may expect a visit from him this afternoon, so I shall not wait another moment, lest he might think it strange if he were to see me in conversation with you. Play your cards well, Armytage, and the fair Zoe will be Lady Octavian Meredith."

The carriage drove away, and Mr. Armytage reascended to his drawing-room, perfectly satisfied with the proposed arrangements, for after all the Duke of Marchmont had just said, he saw at a glance how his daughter and himself would obtain, after the marriage, a suitable footing in the Penshurst family. But as he returned to the apartment in which Zoe was seated, his countenance betrayed not that anything unusual was passing in his mind, and as he was invariably accustomed to parade before his daughter, as well as in the presence of his friends and acquaintances, his great intimacy with the Duke of Marchmont, he was at no loss for an excuse for his Grace's flying visit.

" If I was to listen to that fellow Marchmont," he said to Zoe, " you would scarcely ever have my society at the dinner-table. He is always wanting me to go and dine with him. That is what he came for just now. I do really believe he feels more pleasure in my company than in that of any other of his friends. But hark! there's another knock at the door."

Again did Mr. Armytage take up one of the splendidly bound annuals, and affect to be reading some stanzas by Lady Letitia Fitzharding Fitzpatrick Languishdale. The lines were by courtesy denominated poetry, but in reality they were the most mawkish twaddle that ever was contained in an array of words set out in unmetrical lines, and with false jingles by way of rhymes. The door was thrown open by the gorgeously dressed footman, and Lord Octavian Meredith was announced.

The reader is already aware that this young nobleman had for some little time past been an occasional visitor at

Mr. Armytage's house, and one of those scions of the aristocracy whom the wealthy parvenu had, through the aid of the Duke of Marchmont, secured as the "lions" of his saloons. He therefore received Octavian with becoming courtesy, though with no more cordiality than he had been previously wont to display, for he was careful not to excite a suspicion of the machinations which were in progress. Zoe received the young nobleman with a ladylike affability, and the conversation at first turned upon indifferent subjects. Suddenly Mr. Armytage recollected that he had letters to send off to the post, and he begged his lordship to excuse his temporary absence from the room.

Meredith was now alone with Zoe, and he gave the conversation an intellectual turn. The young lady entered easily into this train of discourse. It was pursued, and both became gradually more and more interested in it. Meredith saw that Zoe possessed a well-cultivated mind; he had all along known that she was accomplished, but he did not suspect the existence of so much of wisdom's treasures in her understanding. He was the more charmed, too, inasmuch as her remarks were made with a mingling of well-bred ease and maidenly bashfulness which totally divested her of the obtrusiveness of the "blue-stocking." He had come expressly thus to draw her out, or, in other words, to fathom the depths of her mind, for he was neither so selfishly degraded in his own disposition, nor so desperate in his circumstances, as to resolve all in a moment to seek as a wife a young female of shallow intellect and frivolous disposition. He remained an hour with Zoe on this occasion, so that he far exceeded the usual limit of a morning call, but the interval appeared to him the lapse of a few minutes only. He had never known so much of Zoe before, and he was as much surprised and delighted at what he thus found her to be on a better acquaintance.

He took his leave, and striking into one of the most secluded portions of the Regent's Park, deliberated with himself. Did he love Zoe? No, assuredly not. Could he bring himself to love her? He sighed. That sigh was an answer to the question, — an answer in the negative. The image of the lovely unknown of whom he had spoken to the Duke of Marchmont suddenly rose up to his mental vision, and he felt that his heart was inextricably engaged there. Then, should he persevere in his contemplated suit with Zoe? His naturally honourable feelings shrank from the thought. At that instant he almost loathed himself as one who had entertained the idea of performing the despicable part of a selfish fortune-hunter, and he said to himself, "No, poverty sooner, — poverty ten thousand times sooner, in preference to this utter self-abasement in my own estimation."

Two days afterward there was a splendid party at the house of Mr. Armytage, and Lord Octavian Meredith was one of the invited guests. He attached himself to Zoe as her principal partner in the dance; he turned the music for her as she sat at the piano; he accompanied her in a duet. He had a fine voice and sang admirably. Zoe's voice was of silvery softness, and she too sang with exquisite taste, — a taste that was all the more apparent from the utter absence of affectation. When Lord Octavian, after having sat by Zoe's side at the supper-table, returned at two in the morning to his own lodgings, he thought to himself that never did Miss Armytage appear so ravishingly beautiful and so charmingly fascinating in his eyes, so that he mentally ejaculated, "After all, I think I can love her."

On the following day he paid the usual visit of courtesy which follows an evening's entertainment, and on this occasion he remained an hour and a half with Zoe, her father having at the time, or pretending to have, a very pressing appointment with some great nobleman, whom he of course spoke of as his very particular and intimate friend. After this visit Lord Octavian said confidently to himself, "I not only can love her, but I do already love her."

Yet an image rose up before him, and a sigh came up into his very throat. He hurried his pace through the Regent's Park as if to escape from the image; he stifled the sigh ere giving it vent, and then he endeavoured to persuade himself that it was all nothing, that the fair unknown had really no hold upon his affections, that it was a mere passing whim or caprice excited by a pretty face and a sylphid figure, — and besides, that it was perfectly ridiculous to entertain a serious thought of one to whom he had never spoken in his life, and whom he might never see again. Still there was a secret voice speaking with its silent eloquence in the depth of his soul, which told him that he was reasoning not as the truth really was, but according as he wished it to be, and this time the deep-drawn sigh could not be altogether stifled.

However, the next day beheld him again a visitor at Mr. Armytage's house. How could he help going thither on this occasion? He had a piece of new music of which he had spoken on the preceding day, and which he had volunteered to bring Zoe. It was a duet, and as Mr. Armytage was present in the drawing-room when Octavian was ushered thither, there was no impropriety in his offering to sing it with the young lady. They did sing it. Octavian thought that never had Miss Armytage displayed her musical accomplishments with so fine an effect, never had her loveliness appeared more angelically charming. When he took his leave after this visit, he had far less difficulty in putting aside the image of the beauteous unknown, or in suppressing the rising sigh, than he had experienced on the preceding day. On the following day he called upon Zoe again, and for nearly each successive day for the ensuing six weeks. On every occasion he became, or fancied that he became, more profoundly enamoured of Miss Armytage; he saw himself received with a gradually increasing cordiality on the part of the father, and with an unchanging affability on that of the daughter. He seldom thought now of the beauteous unknown; less seldom did he find himself sighing when her image did happen to rise up to his mental vision. But did Zoe herself love him? Was he indeed not indifferent to her? Or did she regard him merely as a visitor with whom a sort of intellectual friendship had sprung up? This question puzzled him; he had never seen on Zoe's part the slightest betrayal of any tender partiality toward him. What if he were to offer and to be refused? Such a catastrophe would be terribly humiliating to his manly pride, and in this frame of mind, hovering between hope and uncertainty, it was by no means difficult for Octavian Meredith to persuade himself that he loved Miss Armytage to a degree that his very happiness depended upon their alliance. To do him ample justice, the more he had seen of her and the more he had felt himself attracted toward her, the less he had thought of the pecuniary advantages to be derived from such a marriage. The naturally noble feelings of his disposition, by inducing him to scorn the thought of mere selfish interest, led him to believe that his sentiment toward Zoe was now altogether a disinterested and a legitimate one. So easy is it, under certain circumstances, to hug as a positively settled belief that which we really wish to believe in; so facile is it to cheat at times our own higher intelligence and regard our hopes and our wishes as actual and unmistakable convictions! There are more false fanaticisms and delusions of the mind than even the most experienced of men are always willing to admit unto themselves.

Six weeks, as we have said, had passed since that day on which we first introduced Zoe to our readers, and one afternoon Octavian Meredith called at a somewhat earlier hour than usual. He found Zoe alone in the drawing-room, and as he entered, she put down a book which she had been reading.

"May I see," he inquired, after the usual compliments had passed, "what is the subject of your recreative study?"

"Oh, certainly," responded the young lady, with her usual affable smile. "It is one of my favourite authors."

"Goldsmith's 'Deserted Village,'" said Octavian, as he took up the book. "Miss Armytage, there must be times when, with your intelligence, you view with a feeling which borders on disgust the frivolities of fashionable life. I confess candidly that I do. I am convinced that where there is no intellect there is no heart, but that if the head be hollow, the place where the heart should be is likewise a void."

"I know not, my lord," replied Zoe, "that I would go altogether to such an extreme conclusion — "

"No, because were you to admit it," he exclaimed, with irrepressible enthusiasm, "you would be as it were proclaiming that you are all heart, because you are all intelligence. Ah, Miss Armytage," he added, "were I possessed of a fortune, I should sink down upon my knees to lay it at your feet."

Zoe averted her countenance, where the colour went and came in rapid transitions. It was evident that she knew not how to reply, and Meredith was not altogether sure whether she were offended or pleased by this sort of avowal he had just made. But that she experienced one or the other of those feelings, he had no doubt, for indifferent and unruffled she assuredly was not.

"If I have offended you, Miss Armytage," he went on to say, speaking tremulously, "I should be bitterly irritated against myself. Tell me, have I offended you?"

"No, my lord," she answered, but in accents that were scarcely audible, while the transient glance which she threw upon the young nobleman conveyed the first revelation he had ever yet obtained in respect to the real feeling with which the young lady regarded him.

"Then if I have not offended you," he said, "I may hope that I am not altogether indifferent to you? I have no fortune, Miss Armytage, to lay at your feet, but I have a loving and affectionate heart to offer you. Will you accept it?" and he sank upon his knees before her.

Zoe, with her countenance still averted, and with the colour still coming and going rapidly upon her beauteous cheeks, made no verbal answer, but proffered him her hand. He took it, and conveyed it to his lips. But scarcely had those lips touched it, when she gently but firmly disengaged it, and rising from her seat, said, in a low but clear voice, "My lord, I must now refer you to my father — Perhaps I ought to have done so in the first instance," she added, more gently still.

Octavian had started up from his knees, smitten with the apprehension that he had been too bold in kissing the beautiful white hand which was proffered him, and that the young lady was offended, but he saw by her looks that it was not so. Her conduct was merely that of maiden dignity and of filial obedience, so that all in a moment she rose a thousand times higher in his estimation, if possible, than she had previously stood, highly as he had esteemed her before.

"But I may tell Mr. Armytage," he said, gazing tenderly upon her, "that your consent is already obtained, if his be vouchsafed?"

"It would be on my part, my lord, a ridiculous affectation," responded Zoe, in a voice that was tremulously clear, but yet she spoke with downcast eyes and with a modest confusion bashfully blending with her firmness, — "an affectation insulting, too, to the minds of both of us, were I to declare that you are an object of indifference to me. You have my consent, if you obtain my father's. And think not, my lord, that I fail to appreciate the honour which you confer upon me, — the perhaps too flattering compliment which you pay me — "

" Zoe, dearest Zoe," exclaimed Octavian, " never did you seem more charming in my eyes. Never was your conduct more admirable than at this moment. If your father will consent to our union, I swear that your happiness shall henceforth prove the study of my life."

Again he took her hand, again he pressed it to his lips, and it was not withdrawn, but then he retained it only for a single instant, and bending upon the lovely blushing girl a look of tenderness, he issued from the room. The moment the door closed behind him, Zoe sank upon the sofa whence she had risen up, murmuring to herself with a sensation of holy rapture, " He loves me. He loves me."

Yes, Octavian Meredith had all along been the object of Zoe's secret and hidden affection, and thus the designs of her father were, by an extraordinary coincidence, forwarded by her own feelings. We denominate it extraordinary, because let the reader reflect how seldom it is in real life that where a parent has from selfish or sordid motives fixed upon a particular individual to become his son-in-law, the daughter's own heart has the whole time been acquiescing in the choice. It was, however, so on the present occasion, and though Miss Armytage was not of a disposition to abandon herself to a feverish and unnatural excitement, though her mind was too strong and her temperament too placid for such inordinate agitation, yet it would be wrong to imagine, and would indeed be stamping her as deficient in the softness of feminine feeling, if we were to say that her heart fluttered not at all. It did palpitate with a considerable degree of suspense, but her emotions betrayed themselves not outwardly with much violence; yet it was not through any habitual dissimulation nor studied hypocrisy that they were concealed. No, she was all guileless innocence and unsophisticated ingenuousness, but her disposition, as already stated, was naturally calm, her feelings sank deep down and bubbled up but little to the surface, and they were the purer, the more genuine, and the more lasting on that very account.

She was not kept long in a state of uncertainty. In about half an hour the door opened, and Octavian hastened into her presence again, his countenance beaming with rapture and delight, not unmingled with astonishment. The result of his interview with Mr. Armytage was thus at once proclaimed, even before a single syllable fell from his lips, and now Zoe no longer withdrew her hand when he sought to retain it, nor did she with a prudish affectation hold back her countenance from the kiss which her accepted lover imprinted on her pure chaste forehead.

Octavian might well be astonished at the assent which he had received from Mr. Armytage, for notwithstanding the reasoning of the Duke of Marchmont, he had scarcely anticipated that a man whom he knew to be so worldly-minded as Zoe's father would with a comparative readiness afford his acquiescence to the suit of a portionless lover. But then Mr. Armytage had given an affirmative response in that specious manner which he was so proficient in adopting. He had thrown out a hint to the effect that he had never sought for his daughter an alliance with mere rank, but had hoped that she would become the wife of some individual more in her own sphere.

" However," he had gone on to observe, " Zoe is an only child, and I am too fondly devoted to her to thwart her happiness in a single respect. You say, my lord, that she loves you, and therefore you have my concurrence. All my earthly aims are concentrated in the ensurance of my beloved Zoe's felicity. Without being considered guilty of too much paternal pride, I may safely assert that I bestow upon you a veritable treasure. See that you treat her kindly, my lord; show me that you appreciate the precious gift which I now declare to be yours, and I shall know how to express my gratitude."

Lord Octavian made suitable acknowledgments, and he was completely deceived by the specious language used by Mr. Armytage on this occasion, so that he thought to himself that Zoe's father must in reality possess an excellent heart notwithstanding his worldly-minded pursuits. Before he and Mr. Armytage separated on that occasion, the latter gave the young nobleman to understand the amount of the dowry he purposed to give his daughter, the mode of its settlement, and the allowance that would be made to Octavian himself. To all these proposals Meredith assented with a readiness which originated from his own earnest straining to convince himself as well as others, that he was unbiassed by interested views in the matter. Then Mr. Armytage hinted that if the young nobleman had any debts they should at once be liquidated, but to this offer Octavian was enabled to give a proud negative, he having no pecuniary liabilities. We do not mean that the pride of that response was of an aristocratic nature; it was the pride of one who felt that he might assume a manly dignity in proclaiming the rectitude of his conduct, which had been proof against all the temptations to extravagance by which he had of late been surrounded.

But if Octavian went away from that intervew in astonishment at the apparently frank, noble-minded, and fondly paternal behaviour of Mr. Armytage, not the less astonished was Mr. Armytage himself to learn that Zoe loved her noble suitor. However, he did not waste much time in pondering upon this matter; it was sufficient for him that Zoe had thus by her own conduct fallen into the views which he had entertained on her behalf, and he sped away to Belgrave Square, to inform the Duke of Marchmont of all that had just taken place.

A month afterward — namely, at the end of August, 1847 — the bridal took place. Mr. Armytage insisted that it should be solemnized with all possible circumstances of splendour, and immense therefore were the preparations made for the occasion. Zoe would gladly have gone to the altar under circumstances far less ostentatious, but she had never been in the habit of disputing her sire's will, and she was by no means likely to do so while entertaining the belief that he had put all selfish considerations aside through a fond regard for her happiness wholly and solely. She accordingly suffered the arrangements to progress without the slightest remonstrance on her part, reserving to herself the privilege of settling the precise details of her toilet, which she was resolved should be characterized by that elegant simplicity which was most congenial to her taste and disposition. The wedding-breakfast was to be a perfect banquet, and as if Mr. Armytage did not already possess plate sufficient, he expended two or three thousand pounds in the purchase of additional table ornaments to be used on the occasion. The invitations were likewise more numerous than Zoe would have preferred, if left to her own choice, but herein again she quietly let her father have his own way. The Duke of Marchmont faithfully promised to attend at the wedding-breakfast, and Mr. Armytage, satisfied with this pledge, readily excused his Grace from accompanying the bridal party to the church.

On the eve of the day fixed for the ceremony, Mr. Armytage was seized with a violent fit of the gout, and his physicians positively forbade him from attempting to stir out-of-doors. Zoe, deeply afflicted at this circumstance, besought her sire to postpone the wedding, but he would not listen to it. All the preparations were fully made, and he was determined that the ceremony should take place. Zoe still renewed her entreaties, but in the midst of this discussion Octavian Meredith himself arrived, his countenance beaming with the satisfaction of one who had good intelligence to impart. He was, however, for a moment saddened on perceiving Mr. Armytage sitting in an easy chair with one of his legs hugely bandaged up, — saddened too, likewise, because he beheld the tears trickling down Zoe's cheeks. The intelligence he had to communicate was to the effect that the invitations, which as a matter of courtesy had been forwarded to his father and his two brothers, were all accepted, and he himself had brought the written replies, addressed to Mr. Armytage. They were couched in courteous terms, and Octavian explained that he was now completely reconciled to his relatives. If any circumstance had been wanting to support the resolution of Mr. Armytage that the bridal should take place on the morrow, notwithstanding his own indisposition, it was the intelligence Octavian had just imparted. Zoe, perceiving further remonstrance to be vain, yielded to her sire's will, and her grief at his illness was mitigated not only by the assurance that he should be enabled to preside at the wedding-breakfast, but also by the satisfaction which he and she alike experienced at Octavian's reconciliation with his family.

On the following morning the bridal was celebrated. The Marquis of Penshurst, — a tall, thin, pale old man, — accompanied by his two elder sons, arrived at the mansion at an early hour, and though they were but little more than coldly courteous to Mr. Armytage, they were on the other hand exceedingly affable and cordial toward Zoe, whose beauty and inobtrusive manners made an immediate impression upon them. The Marquis of Penshurst gave Mr. Armytage to understand that he had converted the allowance of five hundred a year made to Octavian, into a permanent settlement, and that he had moreover presented the young bridegroom with a thousand guineas, duly paid over to his account at the bankers'.

Two young ladies of rank acted as bridesmaids, and an earl undertook to give the bride away, as her father was unable to proceed to the church. The ceremony was solemnized at All Souls, in the fashionable quarter of Langham Place, and we must content ourselves with observing that the bride looked ravishingly beautiful as well as sweetly interesting. The wedding-breakfast fulfilled, in its sumptuous display of plate and in its profusion of all the choicest delicacies, the intents and wishes of the ostentatious Mr. Armytage; the Duke of Marchmont, faithful to his promise, was amongst the guests, who were described in the newspaper-paragraphs of the following morning as being "the élite of the fashionable world." When the repast was over, Zoe — having taken an affectionate and tearful leave of her parent — was handed by the bridegroom to the handsome carriage presented to the young couple by the bride's father, and they set off to spend the honeymoon at some watering-place, where a suitable house had been already engaged for their reception.

CHAPTER XII

CHRISTINA

Six weeks had elapsed since the bridal ceremony; it was now the middle of October, and the young couple, having returned to London, took possession of a house in Regent's Park, on the side exactly facing the abode of Mr. Armytage. Zoe naturally wished to be near her father, whom she might thus see daily, or at least very often, and Lord Octavian Meredith, having no particular choice as to the place of his residence, cheerfully carried out the wishes of his beauteous bride. During the honeymoon he had found no reason to be disappointed in the estimate which he had previously formed of Zoe's intellect, temper, and disposition. All the excellent traits of her mind — and she had no bad ones — developed themselves in a manner full well calculated to rivet her husband's affections, if they were susceptible of such adhesion unto her. She was all gentleness and amiability, candour and truthfulness, ingenuousness and innocence. Her love, being crowned by happiness, appeared to render her beauty more angelically fascinating, if indeed there had been any room for such enhancement of her charms. In short, Lord Octavian Meredith had every reason to be the happiest and most contented of men.

One afternoon, a few days after the return of the young couple from the watering-place, Lord Octavian had occasion to call upon Mr. Armytage on some little business connected with the settlement of Zoe's dowry. We should observe that during the interval since the marriage, Mr. Armytage had entirely recovered from his attack of gout, and had become as bustling and active as ever. The business between himself and his son-in-law was speedily concluded, and Octavian took his leave, to retrace his way on foot across the park to his own dwelling. He was walking along that road which, diverging from the main one near the Colosseum, leads to the inner circle, when his attention was suddenly drawn to a scene that was taking place a little way ahead. A gentleman, having caught the hand of a young female genteelly but simply dressed, was endeavouring to retain it against her will, and was doubtless addressing her in a style of language which excited her virtuous indignation, for as she struggled to release her hand from his grasp, her ejaculations of angered remonstrance reached Octavian's ear. But, ah, that figure! He recognized it in a moment, and darting forward, reached the spot swift as an arrow shot from a bow. The gentleman — a gentleman in name only, but not in conduct — was at once stricken to the ground by the chivalrous and indignant Meredith, for it is only fair to observe that if the young person who was the object of the genteel ruffian's outrage had been an utter stranger to him, he would have acted in precisely the same manner.

The discomfited individual started up from the ground in a furious rage, exclaiming, " By Heaven, sir! whoever you are, you shall give me satisfaction for this insult."

" It is you who have perpetrated the insult against a well-behaved young lady," was Octavian's coldly dignified response, " and you have received your punishment. If in addition to this chastisement, you require any other, depend upon it you shall receive it at my hands. Here is my card."

" Very good," responded the other, without even glancing at the card which Octavian handed him. " You shall hear from me," and with these words, he walked hastily away, brushing off the dust from the sleeve of his coat.

Let us pause for a few minutes to describe the young female whom Meredith had thus delivered from the stranger's audacious conduct, and in whom he recognized the beauteous unknown who has been before aluded to. Beautiful she indeed was, as the reader has been prepared to learn; youthful, too, for she did not appear to be more than sixteen or seventeen years of age. Though slender in figure, the symmetry of her proportions constituted a rare model of developing charms. Her countenance was pale, but it was the paleness of beauty and of health; not the dull dead whiteness of the skin, but the purest complexion with a vital animation upon it. Her eyes were large and dark; their

dwelling. He was walking along that road which, diverging from the main one near the Colosseum, leads to the inner circle, when his attention was suddenly drawn to a scene that was taking place a little way ahead. A gentleman, having caught the hand of a young female genteelly but simply dressed, was endeavouring to retain it against her will, and was meanwhile addressing her in a style of language which excited her virtuous indignation, for as she struggled to release her hand from his grasp, her ejaculations of angered remonstrance reached Octavian's ear. But, ah, that figure! He recognized it in a moment, and darting forward, reached the spot swift as an arrow shot from a bow. The gentleman — a gentleman in name only, but not in conduct — was at once stricken to the ground by the chivalrous and indignant Meredith, for it should be here observed that if the young person who was the object of the genteel ruffian's outrage had been an utter stranger to him, he would have acted in precisely the same manner.

The discomfited individual started up from the ground in a furious rage, exclaiming, " By Heaven, sir! whoever you are, you shall give me satisfaction for this insult."

" It is you who have perpetrated the insult against a well-behaved young lady," was Octavian's coldly dignified response, " and you have received your punishment. If in addition to this chastisement, you require any other, depend upon it you shall receive it at my hands. Here is my card."

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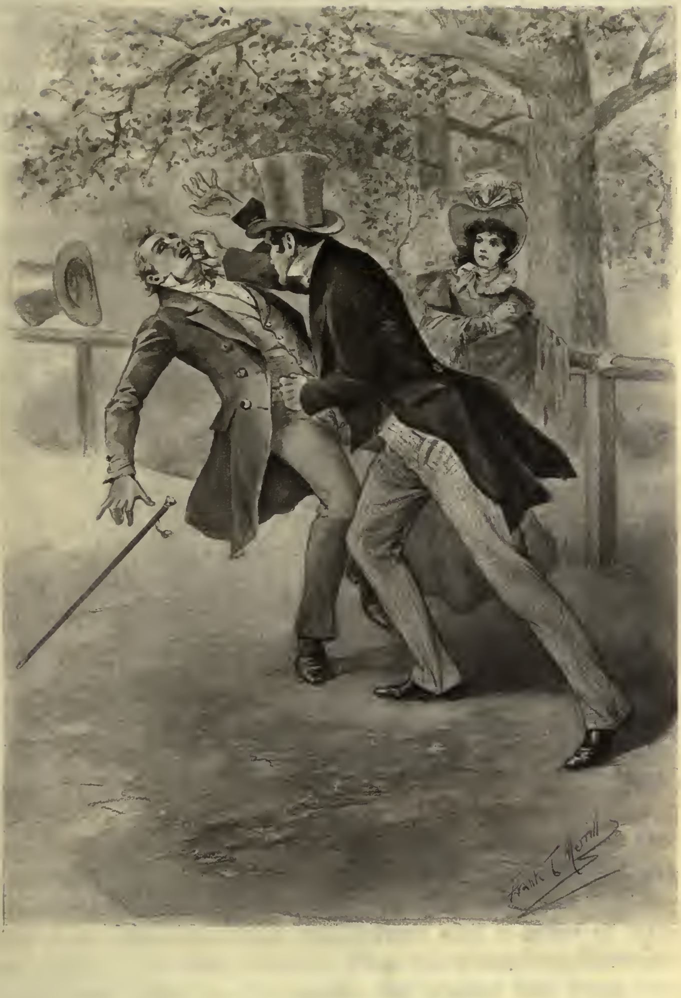
" WAS AT ONCE STRICKEN TO THE GROUND "

Photogravure from original by Merrill


Frank T. Merrill

naturally lustrous beaming was somewhat subdued by an innate modest bashfulness, and partially veiled by the long ebon lashes that fringed them. Her hair was of the very darkest shade, — not that of dull lustreless jet, but that of the shining glossiness of the raven's plumage. It was not merely luxuriant, but of silken softness, and it fell not in ringlets, but in more massive tresses on either side of her beautiful countenance. The rosy hue of the lips set off teeth of a dazzling polish and faultlessly even. When beheld in her quiet moments — for she was now naturally excited by the scene which we have just described — there was a stamp of so much guileless truthfulness and virginal innocence about her that it was a wonder even the most daring libertine could for a single instant have been so thoroughly mistaken in her character and disposition as to suppose that she would listen to his overtures. Still speaking of her in her tranquil moments, we may add that there was a slight settled shade of melancholy, or perhaps rather of pensiveness, on her beautiful countenance; yet this, in no way detracting from the charms which invested her, only perhaps undefinably enhanced them. We have already said that she was plainly but neatly dressed, and there was a natural grace in every movement and in every gesture of this sweet girl. Her eyes, though bright, had none of passion's fire in them; on the contrary, there was something of dovelike mildness in her looks, if such an expression can be applied to the darkest eyes as well as to those of blue. The outline of her countenance was purely Grecian, and the upper lip had that short rich curl which with some women is the type of high birth, with others an evidence of that instinctive feminine dignity which disdains falsehood and is incapable of guile.

Such was the interesting creature with whom Lord Octavian Meredith now suddenly found himself alone. At the instant that he had rushed up to the spot, her countenance was crimsoned with indignation and a sense of outraged virtue; the next moment, when the audacious libertine was stricken down to the earth, the colour fled from her cheeks, leaving them marble pale. She staggered against the railings which skirted the pathway of the road, and endeavoured to compose herself, so as to make suitable acknowledgments to her deliverer, but when she heard the libertine who had insulted her, using threatening terms, talking of satisfaction, and declaring that her defender should hear from him, the proceeding assumed a significancy which, inexperienced as the young girl was in the ways of the world, nevertheless sent the thought flashing into her mind that a duel would possibly be the result of the occurrence. A mortal terror accordingly seized upon her, for to this innocent and pure-minded being it seemed shocking to a degree that two human lives should be thus risked on her account, and one of them the life of her gallant deliverer.

Lord Octavian Meredith turned toward the beautiful stranger, and expressed his hope that she was now recovering from the terror into which the incident had plunged her.

"A thousand thanks to you, sir," she answered, in a tremulously murmuring voice, "for your generous behaviour. But did I rightly interpret the words which that rude person uttered? Oh, sir," she continued, an expression of more than grief, for it amounted to a positive anguish, appearing upon her countenance as she raised her fine dark eyes toward Octavian Meredith, "I beseech—I implore that no life may be risked—"

"Tranquillize your fears," interrupted the young nobleman, in the gentlest and most soothing tones of his naturally harmonious voice. "The man who could thus insult such a one as you must be in his heart a coward, and even should he, through fear of the world's scorn, dare me to a duel, rest assured that I will chastise him."

"Good heavens," murmured the young girl, all her worst fears being thus frightfully confirmed; "you will risk your life!"

"Is it indeed a matter of interest to you that I should take heed of my own safety?" and in putting this question Octavian Meredith was irresistibly carried away by those feelings which he had originally experienced toward the lovely unknown, and which were now resuscitated more vividly than ever.

"Can you ask me, sir," she said, still speaking murmuringly and tremulously, and with affliction in her looks,—"can you ask me if it be a subject of consequence whether lives are to be hazarded? Oh, the bare thought is shocking!" and under the influence of overpowering feelings, she laid her hand upon Meredith's arm, gazing up entreatingly into his countenance as she exclaimed, " For Heaven's sake, accept not the defiance of that man whose conduct has placed him utterly beneath your notice! "

The touch of that beautiful girl's hand — light though it were, and gloved though the hand itself was — sent a thrill of unknown pleasure through the entire form of Octavian Meredith. He experienced feelings such as he had never experienced in respect to Zoe; so that with the rapidity of lightning did the conviction flash to his mind that he had deceived himself as to his real sentiments in respect to her who had become his wife, and that he loved her not as he now felt he loved the dark-eyed, raven-haired being who was before him. This conviction caused him to experience a strong sensation of anguish, which instantaneously followed upon the thrill of pleasure the light touch of her hand had sent with electrifying effect through his entire being. He comprehended all in a moment that his happiness was wrecked by the circumstance of having wedded another, and in a paroxysm of irrepressible emotion, he raised his hand to his brow.

" Ah! you yourself, sir, are smitten with horror at the thought of being placed in a position to take the life of a fellow creature," and the young girl, thus very naturally mistaking the cause of his excitement, clasped her hands entreatingly as she went on to exclaim, " Tell me that you will not accept that bad man's defiance. Pardon this importunity on my part, but believe me, it would make me very, very wretched indeed."

The nature of this colloquy, the close contact into which it brought Meredith and the lovely stranger, the variations of feeling and emotion which the circumstances developed on her part, all contributed to display her beauty in different lights, and to afford him a reading into the innocence, the generosity, and the kindness of her soul. If he had felt himself attracted toward her on those few occasions when he had casually passed her in the street, when he had neither spoken to her nor heard the sound of her voice, and had only obtained transient glimpses of her charms, how much more deeply was he interested in her now that she was there close to him, that he could look into the depths of her fine dark eyes, that he beheld the pearly whiteness of her teeth, that he had leisure to examine every feature of her beauteous face, and that a glance rapidly wandering over her figure confirmed his previous impression of its exquisite symmetry, promising admirable developments, and when, too, her pure breath fanned his very cheek, as under the influence of her feelings she besought him to abstain from the threatened duel. Zoe was forgotten, or if not absolutely forgotten, remembered only as one to whom he had indissolubly linked himself, and who thus stood as a barrier in the way of the crowning happiness of the real love which he experienced. Then too flashed to the mind of the young man the sickening conviction that despite all his sophistical reasonings at the time, he had literally and actually sold himself for Armytage's wealth; whereas, on the other hand, he felt that he could have been content to inhabit the humblest residence, if it were shared by this beauteous being who was now before him.

Such were the feelings and thoughts conjured up all in a moment in the mind of Lord Octavian Meredith, as the charming stranger continued her appeals. For an instant he had flattered himself that these appeals arose from a tender interest which she herself experienced in him, but he had quickly seen, by her answer to that question which he had put, that her entreaties arose merely from a sense of duty and gratitude toward a fellow creature who had behaved nobly on her behalf.

"Will you not promise me," she said, "that this menaced duel shall not take place?"

"Yes, yes, I promise you," he responded, quickly, in order to tranquillize her fears, though without having the intention of keeping the pledge if the threatened satisfaction should be demanded.

"Ah, sir," persisted the young girl, who, artless and unsophisticated though she were, was nevertheless not to be deceived by an assurance which was belied by her deliverer's look and manner, "you only tell me this to set my mind at ease. Oh, I understand," she exclaimed, a light suddenly breaking in upon her soul; "you will be forced to obey those false and unnatural laws which society denominates the code of honour! But it shall not be so," she added, abruptly regaining a degree of firmness, and her countenance expressing a promptly taken resolution. "You have acted generously toward me; I will perform my duty toward you."

" What do you mean? " cried Meredith, in astonishment.

" Will you let me know, sir," inquired the young girl, timidly and bashfully, " the name of him to whom I am under such deep obligations? "

Octavian now understood her in a moment. She purposed to give the proper authorities notice that a duel was to take place, and she hoped that by adopting this course, she would prevent it without suffering his own honour to be compromised. But in the first place, Octavian was no coward, and indeed thought lightly of the prospect of the impending duel, and in the second place he saw that if the authorities were to interfere to prevent it, the worst construction would be put on such a result by his antagonist, who would doubtless proclaim to the world that Meredith himself had deliberately prompted the young girl to give private intimation to the magistrate. So rapidly did all these thoughts flash through his mind that there was no apparent interval of hesitation or reflection on his part, ere he replied to the query she had put, by saying in a collected offhand manner, " My name is Richard Percival."

" Then, Mr. Percival," immediately added the young girl, " accept my gratitude for your generous conduct toward me."

With a graceful inclination of the head, she was hastening away, but Octavian was almost immediately by her side, saying, " Will you not suffer me to learn who it is to whom I have been enabled to render the service which is deemed deserving of thanks? "

The young girl stopped short, and reflected gravely for a few moments. It was evident enough that she was deliberating whether she should tell her name; it was also evident that she feared it would savour of ingratitude and actual rudeness to decline, for she at length observed, slowly, " You have a right to ask this question, sir. My name is Christina Ashton."

" Then, Miss Ashton," at once responded Lord Octavian Meredith, " you will permit me to escort you to your own residence, for fear lest you should again encounter any individual who, wearing the garb of a gentleman, possesses the attributes of a ruffian, and is unable to appreciate the innocence and the respectability which ought to be a sufficient shield against such treatment as you ere now experienced."

"I should be sorry, Mr. Percival," answered the maiden, "to engross any more of your time. Pray suffer me to continue my way alone."

"Miss Ashton, I have read your thoughts — I have fathomed your intentions," exclaimed Meredith. "You are going straight hence to a magistrate. Now, if I promise faithfully that I will not engage in a duel — "

"Alas, sir," said Christina, "you cannot dispose of your own actions in this matter. I have read in books of that false code of honour which, belonging to a bygone barbarism, has been engrafted upon our modern civilization — "

"Miss Ashton, I entreat you not to take the step which you meditate," interrupted Octavian. "Do you know that you would expose me to something far worse than the hazard of losing my life? You would expose me to that of losing my honour. The world would call me coward, and I swear unto you that in spite of all the magisterial and police authority, I would vindicate my reputation and my character."

"Ah, is it so?" murmured Christina, mournfully, for she was smitten with the truth of what her deliverer had just said.

"You see therefore, Miss Ashton," resumed Octavian, "that if actually challenged by that person, I must go out with him. I will no longer attempt to deceive you, for such is the real truth. Do not however be alarmed on my account. If mortally wounded, I should in my last moments be rejoiced to think that I had rendered a service to an amiable young lady such as you are."

The tears started into Christina's eyes at the bare thought of a fellow creature's existence — perhaps a most valuable one — being jeopardized or lost on her account, and moreover, for a naturally sensitive disposition and for a feeling heart, there was something irresistibly touching in the tone and manner in which Octavian had last addressed her. She still lingered, forgetful in the agitation of her mind that the interview had already been too much prolonged, considering that she was standing there conversing with one who was almost a total stranger to her, for we should state that though she herself had on former occasions been noticed by Meredith, she had never observed him. Indeed, so far as she was concerned, she did not recollect having ever seen him before the present occasion.

"You perceive, therefore, Miss Ashton," continued Meredith, "that you really must suffer this matter to take its course, and that you would be doing me a positive injury by any direct interference. At the same time, I fully appreciate the generosity of your motives, and I feel myself bound to offer that you shall be made acquainted with the result. If I fall in the impending duel, some friend of mine shall wait upon you with the intelligence, but if I survive, I will do myself the pleasure of calling, to convince you personally of my safety."

Had Christina Ashton been less inexperienced than she was in the ways of the world, she would have penetrated this somewhat insidious and perhaps not altogether handsome endeavour to draw from her lips an avowal of the place of her abode, but artless and guileless herself, she was unsuspicious of underhand dealings on the part of others. The same motive which had prompted her to mention her name now at once instigated her to mention her address, and having hastily done so, she again bowed and continued her way.

Meredith had no longer the faintest shadow of an excuse for detaining her, though he would gladly have gone on lingering in conversation with a being whose beauty had made such a deep impression upon his heart. We must observe that these scenes had taken place in a portion of the Regent's Park which is seldom much frequented by persons either on foot or on horseback, even when the park itself serves as a fashionable resort; but in the autumn season of the year the fashionable world were for the most part out of town, the parks were well-nigh deserted, and the particular spot where these incidents occurred had not at the time a single individual passing that way, save and except Meredith, Christina, and the impudent libertine who had insulted her.

Octavian continued his way slowly toward his own house. On arriving there, he found the carriage in readiness, as he had promised to accompany Zoe for a drive. His first impulse was to make some excuse, as he wished to be alone with his own thoughts, but his natural generosity would not permit him to do this. He felt that he had no right to deprive his wife of his company, in consequence of any new or altered feelings which might have arisen within him, but that on the contrary, it was his duty to crush and stifle those feelings. This he earnestly resolved to do. He accompanied Zoe for the drive, and the various little evidences of the exquisite sweetness of her temper and the amiability of her disposition, which even the mere tenor of the conversation developed, filled him with remorseful feelings as he remembered all that had passed through his mind while he was with Christina. He forced himself to appear gay, and the unsuspecting Zoe fancied not that there was in reality an abstraction and a preoccupation beneath that cheerful surface. He said nothing to her relative to the adventure which might probably lead to a duel. In the first place, a husband seldom or never imparts to a wife the chance of such a casualty, and in the second place, Octavian felt that he could not touch upon the subject without betraying some emotion while speaking of Christina.

At about nine o'clock in the evening, as Lord and Lady Octavian Meredith were sitting together in their drawing-room, taking their coffee, a servant entered, and presenting a card to his master, intimated that the gentleman whose name it bore requested to see him.

"Ah, Captain Whitby," said Octavian, with an air of assumed carelessness, so as to prevent his wife from suspecting there was anything wrong. "I will come down to him at once," and when the footman had left the room, he observed, in the same easy, indifferent manner, "The captain has come to inquire into the character of a man I had with me previous to our marriage."

Octavian then descended to the dining-room, where Captain Whitby was waiting to see him. The gallant officer had called on behalf of the Honourable Wilson Stanhope, which it appeared was the name of the individual from whose libertine outrage Octavian had rescued Miss Ashton. Meredith penned a hasty note to the Duke of Marchmont, requesting him to act as his second, and this note he begged Captain Whitby to bear to his Grace, who would arrange all preliminaries.

"I have named time and place in my letter, Captain Whitby," added Meredith, "and as a matter of course, all parties engaged will observe the strictest secrecy with regard to the proceedings."

"Such is also Mr. Stanhope's wish," responded the captain. " Mr. Stanhope frankly confesses that under the influence of a champagne breakfast, he behaved rudely to the girl, and therefore, my lord, a single word of apology on your part for the blow you struck will prevent this hostile meeting."

" And that word, Captain Whitby, will not be spoken by my lips," rejoined Meredith.

The captain bowed and took his leave, while Octavian rejoined Zoe, who still saw nothing in his look or manner to create in her mind the slightest suspicion of what was going on.

It is not our purpose to give a detailed description of the duel. Suffice it to say that Octavian rose at an earlier hour than usual, alleging that the fineness of the morning tempted him to a ride on horseback before breakfast, and having embraced Zoe, he took his departure. Mounted on his steed, and having dispensed with the attendance of his groom, he galloped to the place of meeting, where the Duke of Marchmont arrived at the same moment. A few minutes afterward the Honourable Wilson Stanhope and Captain Whitby appeared upon the ground. They had brought a surgeon with them, but he remained in their carriage at a little distance. Shots were exchanged, neither party receiving any injury, and Mr. Stanhope declared that he was satisfied. The two principals then shook hands in the approved manner, and thus in five minutes all was over. Ere separating, it was agreed by those concerned that the utmost secrecy should be observed in respect to the affair, and thus not even a whisper transpired to reach a reporter's ears and engender a paragraph in the public journals.

Lord Octavian Meredith reached home at the usual breakfast-hour, and Zoe still remained without the slightest suspicion that her dearly beloved husband's life had been risked in a duel. We may add, ere closing this chapter, that Meredith had been compelled to inform his friend the Duke of Marchmont of the name and address of Miss Ashton, so that in case he had fallen, his promise might be kept, and the intelligence conveyed to the young lady. But Octavian had not chosen to confess that this Miss Ashton was the very selfsame beauteous unknown of whom he had made mention when consulting the duke in regard to his prospects, as described in a previous chapter.

CHAPTER XIII

THE LODGING - HOUSE

In Mortimer Street, Cavendish Square, a respectable lodging-house was kept by a widow woman named Macaulay. She was about fifty years of age, short and stout, yet bustling and active; very untidy and dirty in her appearance during all the earlier part of the day, but dressed out in a very fine style for the afternoon and evening. She was a Scotch woman, exceedingly thrifty, and bent upon saving a penny here and a penny there to the utmost of her power. She therefore assisted the servants in the housework and the kitchen; hence her morning's untidiness. But when the onerous duties of the day were over, Mrs. Macaulay sported her silk gown, her cap with pink ribbons, her gold watch and chain, and seated herself in her neat little ground floor parlour, ready to receive any of her neighbours who might chance to drop in for a chat. Though parsimonious even to meanness, — beating down her drudges of servants to the lowest possible amount of wages, — she was an honest woman in her way, and made as little free with her lodgers' tea and sugar, butter, and other comestibles, as the most conscientious of her class. Neither did she altogether possess a bad heart, though it was steeled with many defences against accessibility with regard to money matters. She would not mind sitting up all night long to nurse a sick lodger, but she would not at all like to hear the lodger, when rent-day came around, make an excuse for non-payment. Her landlord came to her regularly for his rent, and she therefore must have hers. The tax-gatherers were equally exact in their periodical visits, and she was compelled, as she alleged, to require a corresponding punctuality on the part of her tenants. Such was Mrs. Macaulay, — a woman with whom lodgers were certain to remain on the best possible terms so long as their weekly bills were settled with regularity.

The ground floor, consisting of two rooms, was occupied by herself, — the front being her parlour, the back her bedchamber. The first floor was very handsomely furnished, and was sure to be "well let," as Mrs. Macaulay termed it, in the season, perhaps to a member of Parliament, whose regular residence was in the country. The second floor was far more plainly appointed, but still comfortable enough, and above were the chambers of the servants, with a spare one in case the first-floor lodger should have a servant of his own.

It was about ten o'clock in the forenoon on the very day that the duel took place, that a tall man, of gentlemanly appearance, and well though plainly dressed, — that is to say, his apparel was genteel and of good materials, but without pretension, — passed slowly along Mortimer Street, and observing a card in a window, announcing a first floor to let ready furnished, he knocked at the door. On one of the servants answering it, he requested to look at the rooms, and he was in the first instance shown into Mrs. Macaulay's parlour, while that respectable female "tidied herself up a bit," to use her own phrase. Having washed her face and hands, slipped on her silk gown and her cap with pink ribbons, Mrs. Macaulay entered the parlour, with a simpering mien and a half-curtesy. She prided herself upon being an excellent physiognomist, for she always scrutinized well every applicant for her lodgings, so that she might calculate the chances of being paid her rent, or of having her tenants decamp suddenly some fine day. As a matter of course such disagreeable incidents as these had been within the range of her experience, and by treasuring up in her mind the countenances of the delinquents, she regarded them as criterions for the formation of her judgment in future. Therefore, on entering into the presence of the gentleman to whom we have alluded, she studied him with all the keenness of her perception, yet without appearing to do so.

As we have said, he was of tall stature; we may add that he was of commanding aspect. His hair, which was of an iron gray, was worn much away from above the forehead, and was thin upon the crown. His whiskers, which were large, were a shade darker, yet quite gray at the roots. Handsome he might be considered, so far as the profile was concerned, but he had a cold, stern look that was almost saturnine, and which chilled the beholder. His complexion appeared to be made up of sallowness bronzed with the sun. As for his age, it was by no means easy to fix it; he might be fifty, — he might even be several years younger or older, but that which might have led to the former inference was that he possessed a fine set of teeth which were well preserved. He was dressed in black, and over his shoulders there hung loosely a dark blue cloak. Though it was only the middle of October, the weather was still warmly genial, and the landlady therefore concluded he was an invalid or had lately been one, and thus sought to protect himself against the chance of taking cold. From the result of her survey, she could not exactly make up her mind as to whether she liked his appearance or not. He had the air of a gentleman, but then that cold, severe, stern look of his troubled and bewildered her. Besides, was not the Polish count with an awful long name, and who turned out to be no count at all, but only a wild Irish adventurer, and who had run away five pounds in her debt, — was not he a very gentlemanly man? While, on the other hand, did she not decline to receive as a lodger an elderly person, merely on account of his haughtily stern look, and had not this very individual lived for the last ten years with Mrs. Sifkin over the way, paying his rent as regularly as clockwork, and never venturing a hint that his tea and sugar disappeared rapidly, or that somehow or another something was always wanted, though a store of it had been laid in only a day or two back? Therefore, it was no wonder if worthy Mrs. Macaulay was puzzled how to act in the present instance, and that the tall gentleman's countenance was one which seemed to defy her skill as a physiognomist.

"I see that you have apartments to let," he said, and the mildness of his voice, rich however in its sonorous harmony, and tinctured with a deep mournfulness, almost made her start, for she had expected that nought but the sternest accents could issue from those lips.

"Yes, sir," she responded, cheering up considerably, and again putting on the invariable simper of an obliging landlady, " I think you will find them excellent apartments. Is it for yourself and lady — or — "

" For myself only," replied the stranger, and he made a motion toward the door, as if impatient to view the apartments without further delay or discourse.

" I will show you the rooms, sir," continued Mrs. Macaulay, and as she led the way up the stairs, she muttered to herself, " Heavens! there's a broom where a broom should not be," and then as she reached the landing, she suddenly opened a closet-door and thrust a pail into it, still muttering, " That slut Betsy! what can she be thinking of? "

The apartments were duly shown; the stranger merely flung a single glance around the drawing-room and the bedchamber, which were on the same level, and expressed himself satisfied.

" The rent, sir, is four guineas a week, of course including attendance," said Mrs. Macaulay, " but for this sum you have a chamber up-stairs, in case you keep a servant of your own."

" I have none, and do not mean to keep any," answered the gentleman.

" Very good, sir, just as you think fit," exclaimed Mrs. Macaulay. " You will find mine a very quiet house, and I need not say," she added, drawing herself up, " that it is of first-rate respectability. When should you like to come in, sir? "

" A word or two first, if you please," responded the stranger. " I am somewhat of an invalid, and seek quiet apartments. Have you any other lodgers in the house? "

" The floor above is let, sir, but to the nicest, quietest young people that you could wish to see."

" Have they children? " asked the stranger.

" They are brother and sister, sir," rejoined Mrs. Macaulay, " quite young folks, and highly respectable, for they have never once missed paying their rent since they have been here, which is upward of six months. They go up and down stairs as quiet as mice — "

" And you have no other lodgers? "

" None, sir. If you take these rooms, my lodgings will be all occupied. I only let out these two floors."

" Then I will take the apartments," said the gentleman, "and I shall come hither at once. My trunk is at an hotel hard by; I will go and send it — "

"Perhaps, sir," interposed Mrs. Macaulay, as the stranger was advancing to the door, and she spoke in a mild tone of subdued deprecation, as much as to imply that he must not take offence at what she was about to say, "perhaps you will favour me with a reference?"

"I have none to give. I am acquainted with no one in London; I am a total stranger here. But whatsoever sum in advance you require, you may have," and as the stranger thus spoke, he drew forth a well-filled purse.

"That is not exactly, sir, the same thing," observed Mrs. Macaulay, for she thought to herself, "Did not the gentleman with the red hair, who was no gentleman after all, pay me a fortnight in advance, and then manage to run into my debt ten pounds, in spite of all I could do? And when I asked him for a settlement, did he not run away with my plated coffee-pot and six silver spoons?" So as the worthy landlady hastily reviewed these circumstances in her past experience, she was resolved to take warning therefrom in her present dealings.

"I am not offended," replied the stranger, in his mild, gentlemanly voice, "that you should seek guarantees for the respectability of those who take apartments beneath your roof. Your conduct is in itself a guarantee that your house is a respectable one. I tell you again that I am a perfect stranger in London, but if you will call at the great bankers' in the Strand," and he named the firm to which he alluded, "they will, I think, give you every satisfactory information. The apartments suit me, and as I have taken the trouble to look at them, and have given you the trouble to show them, I have no inclination to go searching elsewhere."

"I am very much obliged, sir," answered Mrs. Macaulay, now cheering up once more; "such a reference will be highly satisfactory. What name, if you please, sir?"

"Make your inquiries relative to Mr. Redcliffe," rejoined the gentleman, and he thereupon took his departure.

Mrs. Macaulay lost not a moment in proceeding to the bankers', and on putting the inquiry to one of the clerks at the counter, she was referred to a gentleman in an inner room. She did not much like this, and again her spirits fell, for she thought that if her would-be lodger had an account at the bank, the clerks must all be prepared to answer any inquiries. However, she put her question to the gentleman to whom she was thus introduced in the private room, and he, having listened to her, gravely turned over the leaves of a huge book which lay open before him.

"I know nothing of Mr. Redcliffe," he at length said.

"Then I am robbed of my time, and should have been swindled out of my rent," ejaculated the irate Mrs. Macaulay. "Who knows but that he would have walked off with another coffee-pot and another six silver spoons?"

"Stop, stop, my good woman," interrupted the banker, with an imperious wave of his pen; "you should have patience. I was going to say that I know nothing of Mr. Redcliffe personally, nor who he is, nor what he is. But this I do know, that I have upwards of one hundred thousand pounds in my hands, to the account of that gentleman."

"Ah, dear me!" said Mrs. Macaulay, scarcely able to speak through utter amazement. "A hundred thousand pounds, and I who was afraid of my plated coffee-pot and my silver spoons."

"I think, ma'am," resumed the banker, "that if you have Mr. Redcliffe as a lodger, — always supposing him to be the same Clement Redcliffe whose name figures in my book, — you run no risk of losing your coffee-pot or your silver spoons."

The banker then bowed slightly, but with the unmistakable air of a man who had no more to say, and whose time was precious. Mrs. Macaulay thereupon took her leave, and entering an omnibus, was borne in the direction of her own residence. But during the ride fresh misgivings gradually arose in the mind of this very cautious and indeed suspicious woman. What if after all the individual who had taken her apartments was not the real Clement Redcliffe? What if he were some swindler, who having learned that a gentleman of such a name had money at the bank, but was not known there, had availed himself of such information to pass himself off as the veritable Mr. Redcliffe? She worked herself up to such a pitch of suspicion and mistrust that she was half-inclined to refuse to receive the gentleman. She thought it so odd that a man worth upwards of one hundred thousand pounds should be without a single acquaintance in London. She could scarcely believe it was so, and therefore regarded it as an excuse on the part of an impostor for not giving any other reference than the one to the banker. But then, as she entered Mortimer Street, glanced at Mrs. Sifkins's over the way, and thought of how she had overreached herself by her suspicions in respect to the old gentleman who had taken her rival's lodgings, had lived there for years, had paid his rent regularly, and never looked into his tea-caddy, she endeavoured to reason herself against her present mistrust. In short, the result was that she decided in the gentleman's favour, though not without a lingering apprehension in her mind that she was doing wrong and that he would turn out a swindler after all. The new lodger's luggage presently arrived from the neighbouring hotel, and as Mrs. Macaulay was on the lookout for the porter who brought it, she beckoned the man into her parlour, gave him a glass of gin, — not forgetting to take one herself likewise, — and began to question him.

" Who is this Mr. Redcliffe? " she inquired.

" Don't know, ma'am, nothink about the gentleman, only that he has paid all the servants in a wery 'andsome manner."

" How long has he been at your hotel? "

" Why, he come fust of all a matter of six or seven weeks back, I should think, as near as I can recollect. But he only stayed a few days, and was shut up in his room looking over all the old files of newspapers he could possibly get hold of. We have filed the *Times* at our place for the last twenty year, and, bless me! if I don't think he must have read it all through, for he was always poring over it from morning to night. The head waiter said as how he thought the gentleman was either a politician studying politics, or else fancied hisself to be the heir at law of a fortune, and was looking out for the advertisements to the next of kin, or else that he must have been abroad a many years, and on coming home wanted to see what had took place in his absence."

" How strange! " said Mrs. Macaulay; then as her own ideas always settled on money matters, she added, " I will be bound it was the advertisements he was looking after, and that he has got his fortune, and that's the money that has been paid into the bankers'. Well, but you say he only stayed with you a few days first of all?"

"No more he did," responded the hotel porter, "and he set off one day into the country with only a little carpet-bag, observing that he should be back in a short time. He did not pay his bill when he went away, but seemed desperate hurried. Five or six weeks passed, and the governor" — meaning the landlord — "began to think he was gammoned, and that the gentleman's great big trunk might only have brickbats and straw in it arter all, and that he had took away his shirts and what-not in the carpet-bag."

"And a very reasonable suspicion too," observed Mrs. Macaulay. "I should have entertained it long before the six weeks were up. But go on."

"Well, ma'am, it was on'y yesterday morning," continued the porter, "that the governor, finding his customer didn't come back, decided on breaking open the trunk, and he calls me to get a jimmy — that's a crowbar, you know, ma'am — to do it. So, just as I was going up-stairs with the jimmy, a cab stops at the door, and who the deuce should walk in but Mr. Redcliffe, followed by the jarvey with the carpet-bag. So I slips the jimmy up my back, under my coat, and makes my bow as Mr. Redcliffe passes. Wasn't the governor glad that he hadn't come a few minutes later? for if he had, the trunk would have been opened as sure as a gun."

"I know I should have opened it at the end of the first week," interjected Mrs. Macaulay. "Well, what next?"

"Why, ma'am, just now — about an hour back — Mr. Redcliffe rings and orders his bill. Now, don't you see, his trunk had been standing in his bedroom for the whole six weeks he had been absent, so of course the governor charges him for the use of the room the whole time. The waiter didn't much like taking up the bill, though he's got plenty of brass, that selfsame waiter has. But Mr. Redcliffe just glanced at the amount, threw down some bank-notes, and paid the bill without an instant's hesitation."

"That's just what I like," ejaculated Mrs. Macaulay, resolving that her own bills should not be stinted in items, and with a quick mental glance perceiving in a moment how a few little extras could easily be stuck on.

"And I'm blessed, ma'am," continued the hotel porter, "if Mr. Redcliffe didn't pay all the servants just as though he had been stopping at the hotel the whole six weeks."

"Take another glass of Hollands," exclaimed Mrs. Macaulay, becoming bounteous in her exuberant glee at having such a lodger, and in finding all her suspicions most completely allayed.

The man quaffed the strong waters, carried the huge trunk up-stairs, and then took his departure. Shortly afterward Mr. Redcliffe made his appearance, and at once took possession of his apartments, Mrs. Macaulay having in the meantime put on her Sunday apparel, including a new cap with pink ribbons, in order to give him the best welcome possible.

CHAPTER XIV

THE TWINS

At the same time that Mr. Redcliffe thus arrived at his new lodging, the occupants of the second floor, to whom Mrs. Macaulay had alluded, were seated together at a table, on which were books and needlework. The room was tolerably well furnished for a second floor, and was at least quite comfortable. The two inmates were a brother and a sister, and even a superficial observer would have seen that they were twins. We need not enter into any lengthy description of the sister, inasmuch as we have already described her, for she was none other than that same Christina Ashton on whose account Lord Octavian Meredith fought a duel. We may however remind the reader that she appeared to be between sixteen and seventeen years of age, and that she was exquisitely beautiful.

Christina's brother was an exceedingly prepossessing youth; he had large dark eyes, similar to those of his sister, and though perhaps his hair was not of the same intense darkness, it nevertheless had an almost equally fine natural gloss upon it. Like herself, he possessed a superb set of teeth, and his countenance was pale, not with a sickly pallor, but with that absence of a florid hue which is usually characteristic of youthful faces when set off by dark hair and eyes. Christina's figure had as yet all the slenderness and willowy elasticity of her tender youthfulness, — at the same time promising to expand, as she approached more nearly to womanhood, into rich developments. The bust had already its nascent contours, carefully concealed by the modest apparel which ascended to the very throat, — and that throat, how sweetly beautiful, how transparently white! The youth's figure was likewise slender, symmetrically formed, and promising as his own years also advanced to be of well-knit, manly proportions. There was a remarkable similitude between this brother and sister, — not only in respect to personal appearance, but also with regard to their minds and dispositions. They had been well educated; they were naturally intelligent, and they had intellectual tastes. They were devoted to each other, and thus, when the sister was occupied with her needlework, the brother read to her from some book which was calculated to instruct as well as to amuse.

Over the countenances of both there was the slightest possible shade of pensiveness, which at times even deepened into melancholy, but when they caught this profounder expression on each other's face, they would instantaneously brighten up, as if it were a tacit consent between them that they should avoid mutually saddening influences. There is always something interesting about twins; there is sure to be a deep affection existing between them, and most generally a strong physical similitude; their tastes, too, and the casts of their minds, generally have much about them that is identical, but perhaps in no case were all these characteristics so profoundly stamped, so marked, so visible, as in that of which we are speaking. Very interesting therefore was this youthful pair; and as if nothing should be wanting to sustain the impression of their twin condition, an identity of name had been observed with regard to them so far as the difference of the sex would permit, for the brother was denominated Christian, and the reader is already aware that the sister was called Christina.

We introduce them in the afternoon of the day following Christina Ashton's adventure in the Regent Park, and therefore the same on which the duel had been fought in the morning. Christina had of course told her brother every particular, for they had no secrets from each other; and now, when occasionally glancing up from his book, he perceived that she was evidently somewhat restless and uneasy, he could full well divine the cause thereof. At first he forbore allusion to it, fearing to rivet her thoughts too completely upon the subject; but when he observed her restlessness increasing, he laid down his book, and said, in a plaintive voice, "I wish, dearest sister, that you were relieved from this anxiety."

" It is a dreadful thing, Christian," she responded mournfully, as the tears started into her beautiful dark eyes, " to reflect that lives have possibly been risked, and even lost, by this time, and entirely on my account."

" But did not Mr. Percival promise that you should be made acquainted with the result? " asked the brother; " and depend upon it, that if anything fatal had occurred we should know it by this time. Mr. Percival did not tell you where he resided, I think, — for if he had, I would go and make some inquiry in his neighbourhood."

" No," responded Christina, " he suspected that I purposed to inform the authorities and prevent the duel."

" Ah, my dear sister," exclaimed Christian, " it was the first time you ever went out alone during the whole six months we have been in London, and it shall be the last."

" You were so occupied with your drawing, you know, Christian," answered his sister, " that I did not like to take you away from it; and as the Regent's Park is so near, I thought there was no harm for me to go alone as far as Mr. Preston's. Besides, you had forgotten that it was the day for receiving our monthly money, and so you were not ready dressed to go out. The hour had arrived when the money was to be called for, and you are aware how severe and particular — indeed, how cross and stern Mr. Preston is, and how particular he was in enjoining us always to come to the very day and to the very hour, otherwise he should be offended."

" Well, my dear sister, another time," responded Christian, " I will be sure to recollect when pay-day comes around, and I will be ready to go out with you to the very hour. But I forgot to ask you, did Mr. Preston prove more communicative — "

" Than on former occasions? " asked Christina. " No, not at all. He was abrupt and hurried as he always is, — curt enough, without being absolutely rude. I lingered with the intention of asking him a few questions, but he quickly bowed me out, and the servant was in readiness to open the front door."

" How I dislike all this mystery! " exclaimed Christian, the natural sweetness of his temper being for a moment ruffled by a vexation which may be understood from the remarks he went on to make. "I cannot lead a life of idleness. I long to be placed in some position that will enable me to earn something. If it be charity we are dependent upon, the sooner we escape from such a humiliating position the better; but if it be that our dear deceased uncle, on dying so suddenly, left us some property, and that this Mr. Preston is his executor, and, so to speak, our guardian, I wish he would tell us exactly how we are situated and what we have to rely upon, much or little. I am determined, Christina, that when the monthly pay-day comes around again, I will ask firmly, but of course respectfully, for some little information on these points."

"Yes, you shall do so, Christian," was the sister's response. "It was a year last Monday," she added, with a sigh, "that our dear uncle was smitten with death in so shocking a manner, and only last Monday, therefore, that we put off the mourning we had worn for him."

"And during all this time," added Christian, "we have learned no more of the circumstances in which we were left by Mr. Ashton than we knew on the very day of his demise, unless it be that Mr. Preston became in some way or another interested in our behalf. Ah, I hoped when, six months back, he sent for us to come up from our own pleasant little village to this great metropolis, that it was to do something for me, to give me a profession or an employment, to put me in a way to carve out for myself some career suitable to my tastes. But no, nothing of the sort. Here we have been six months in these lodgings, and I am no farther advanced in my hopes than I was on the day of our arrival. But, ah, I must not repine; it is perhaps wicked in me to do so, for we have enough to support us comfortably, and our wants being limited, twelve guineas a month are a little fortune."

"I am not sorry, dearest brother, to hear you speak now and then in a way which proves that you possess proper manly aspirations," and as Christina uttered these words, her looks were bent with inexpressible fondness, mingled with a sisterly admiration, upon Christian.

At this moment one of the servants of the household entered the room, and said, "Please, miss, here's a gentleman inquiring for you. He says he is Mr. Percival."

"Then he is safe!" murmured Christina, with a look of profound thankfulness, while her brother bade the servant show the gentleman up.

But while Lord Octavian Meredith is ascending the stairs, we must avail ourselves of the opportunity to describe under what circumstances he still preserved his feigned name of Percival, and meant to retain it while visiting Christina. The reader already knows that he had all along been deeply enamoured of the young girl while she was still to him only "his fair unknown," and that he had deluded himself in respect to the real nature of the sentiments which he experienced toward Zoe. That unexpected meeting with Christina in the park had torn the veil from his eyes, and had cleared his mental vision to the full perception of the grievous mistake he had made. In short, he could not conceal from himself that he was deeply attached to Christina Ashton, that he loved her with an enthusiasm it was impossible for him to restrain; and though his duty toward Zoe and his duty toward Christina herself should have led him to avoid the dangers of another interview, he had not the moral courage, he had not, indeed, sufficient control over himself, to resist the temptation of calling upon the object of his passion. To do the young nobleman justice, the idea of a deliberate seduction had not for a single instant entered his head. In his infatuation he thought of nothing but the pleasure of beholding Christina again, of contemplating her beauty, of listening to the sweet music of her voice. Yet there was a whisper in his soul that this visit which he was now paying would not be the last, for he could not possibly make up his mind to the bold and resolute step of avoiding her in future. Yet to announce his real name, to proclaim himself Lord Octavian Meredith, would be to furnish her with the means of ascertaining that he was already married, — a circumstance which an accident at any moment might bring to her knowledge. And if the truth did thus come to her ears, he could not again hope to be received by her; whereas, if disguised under the name of Percival, he might entertain the hope of being occasionally permitted to call in Mortimer Street. Thus it was without any deliberately wicked plan, without any positively settled design against the virtue of the young girl, but merely in obedience to an infatuation which he could not possibly control, Lord Octavian Meredith secured to himself the advantage which his feigned name gave him in the matter.

It was not until Meredith entered the young people's sitting-room that he entertained any particular idea of whom he should find with Christina, — whether she was living with parents or relatives, nor, indeed, in what circumstances she was placed, — save and except that he knew she had a brother, with whom he had seen her walking on a few occasions, as he had stated to the Duke of Marchmont. He had longed to ask the servant who opened the door some few questions; but he was fearful that such curiosity, on being reported to those whom it concerned, would act prejudicially against him, and therefore he had abstained.

"According to my promise, Miss Ashton," he said, as he entered the apartment, "I am here to make you aware of my safety."

He extended his hand toward the young girl, who gave him hers, with an ingenuous frankness, for she felt that she lay under a deep obligation to one who had delivered her from a gross insult, and who, by the very words which had just fallen from his lips, had evidently been compelled to risk his life on her account.

In the same artless manner she renewed her thanks for his chivalrous conduct, and timidly but sincerely expressed her delight that no serious consequences had ensued.

"None, Miss Ashton," answered Meredith. "I went out with Mr. Stanhope, — for that is the name of the gentleman who insulted you, — and no harm was done. I need not ask if this be your brother," and thus speaking he turned toward Christian, to whom he with well-bred affability proffered his hand, which was accepted with all the frankness of unsuspicious youth.

Octavian sat down, and began conversing with the twins upon a variety of topics. He learned from them that they had been six months in the metropolis, that their parents had been long dead, that they were brought up by an uncle, a gentleman of some little property, who dwelt in a remote village in the northern part of England, and that they possessed not, to their knowledge, any relatives now upon the face of the earth. These little pieces of information came out during the discourse, but the twins did not mention whence their present resources were derived, and Lord Octavian did not seek by any insidious dexterity to fathom the matter. He saw that they were all ingenuousness, frankness, and inexperience, and he was fearful of shocking the delicate fibres of their minds by the display of aught savouring of undue curiosity. On rising to take his leave, he requested permission to call occasionally when he might happen to be passing that way. Christina gave no response, but Christian, delighted at what he considered a display of the kindliest and friendliest feeling, cheerfully proclaimed his assent.

Lord Octavian Meredith had not taken his departure many minutes — and the twins were in the midst of self-congratulations that the duel had resulted without injury to either party — when Mrs. Macaulay burst somewhat suddenly into the room, with a visible consternation depicted upon her countenance. The brother and sister both surveyed her in alarm, and she hastened to exclaim, "Have I not heard you say, my dear young gentleman and lady, that Mr. Preston, of the Regent's Park, is your friend, or guardian, or something of the sort?"

A quick affirmative burst from the lips of the twins; and it was with increased suspense, mingled even with terror, that they surveyed Mrs. Macaulay, for they were smitten with the presentiment that something serious had happened.

"Do tell me," she went on to exclaim, "has Mr. Preston got much money of yours in his hands?"

"We do not know," was Christian's response. "Indeed, we are utterly uninformed on the subject. But what has occurred?"

"I am really very much afraid it will be a sad blow for you," she said. "Now, don't alarm yourselves — I mean, don't excite yourselves too much, though I dare say it will be exciting enough — "

"But what has occurred?" asked Christina, almost goaded to torture with anxiety. "Do not keep us in suspense."

"Mr. Preston has run away," responded Mrs. Macaulay. "He has committed forgeries to an immense amount. Placards are posted up offering a reward for his apprehension, — I have just seen one, — and as the name struck me, I was fearful it might be your Mr. Preston. And it is, too, there is no doubt. Joseph Preston, of Cambridge Terrace?"

Yes, it was the same, and this announcement came like a thunderbolt upon the brother and sister. For upwards of a minute they stood contemplating Mrs. Macaulay in blank dismay; then, as if simultaneously smitten by the same sentiment, which prompted them to seek consolation from each other, they locked themselves in a fond embrace. Mrs. Macaulay's worst fears were confirmed from the effect which her intelligence had produced upon the twins. We have already said that she did not positively possess a bad heart, but her better feelings were almost completely overruled by her love of gain and her fear of loss, so that while, on the one hand, she really pitied the orphans, yet on the other she was already wondering to herself whether they could possibly think of keeping on their lodgings, and whether the rental of twenty-five shillings a week would be thenceforth safe.

"Don't you think you had better go at once," she suggested, "to Mr. Preston's house? I dare say the police are in possession of it; and you can at all events find out whether he has left behind him any papers regarding yourselves."

Christian and Christina were at once struck by the excellence of this advice, and by the necessity of immediately following it. Mrs. Macaulay slowly retired from the room, and the twins, having again embraced each other, and whispered words of hope and consolation in each other's ears, hastened to their respective chambers to dress for going out. In a few minutes they were ready, and they sallied forth together. As they proceeded along, arm in arm, toward the Regent's Park, they spoke but little, yet they were constantly turning their handsome dark eyes upon each other, to infuse mutual encouragement by their looks. Each strove to assume an air of as much cheerfulness as possible, for the sake of the other, but both in their hearts entertained deep misgivings lest the crimes of Mr. Preston should prove ruinous to themselves. Many a passenger in the street lingered to gaze upon that interesting pair, — that young damsel with the sylphid form, that youth with the slender, graceful shape, both endowed with so high an order of beauty, and their twin condition being at a glance recognizable. But they saw not that they were thus the objects of such interest, — an interest all the deeper inasmuch as there was trouble but too evident in their countenances, despite all their efforts to conceal it.

We may here pause to observe that the Mr. Preston who has been mentioned was a man of about fifty, short and slight, of exceeding bustling habits, and with a thorough businesslike air. He had possessed a counting-house in the City, and his private residence was one of the mansions on Cambridge Terrace in the Regent's Park. He had ever been reputed a rich man, but, unlike Mr. Armytage, he had cared little or nothing for brilliant society, and had never courted it. Perhaps if his affairs had long been failing, he might have located himself in the Regent's Park with the hope of sustaining the impression that he was really wealthy, rather than for the purpose of mingling in the fashionable world. He was unmarried and childless, and thus, fortunately, he had no close connections to be involved in his ruin and disgraced by it.

Christian and Christina reached Cambridge Terrace, and their summons at the front door was answered by a police constable. From him they learned that Mr. Preston had committed forgeries to the amount of thirty thousand pounds, as already ascertained, and that it was suspected there were other cases which were yet to transpire. It was only at an early hour in the morning of this same day that the forgeries were discovered by some gentleman in the financial world, and when the police, on receiving the information, had arrived at Cambridge Terrace to apprehend the culprit, they found that he had absconded during the past night. In addition to these particulars, Christian and Christina learned that no papers of any consequence at all had been discovered either at the dwelling in Regent's Park or at the office in the City, but that in Mr. Preston's bedroom at the former there were traces of a considerable number of documents having been purposely burned in the grate.

Such were the particulars gleaned from the police constable, and the twins passed away from the mansion, slowly and in silence. They walked some distance before they even dared to glance toward each other; they felt that their ruin had been accomplished. At length their looks met, tears filled the eyes of both, and they would have flung themselves into each other's arms were it not a public place and people were proceeding hither and thither.

"Let us not despond, dearest sister," said Christian, suddenly wiping his eyes. "That which Mr. Preston did not do for me I must now endeavour to achieve for myself. I will seek for a situation that may enable me to earn at least something, and I will work hard, dear Christina, to keep us both in respectability."

"And I too will work, Christian," replied the sister. "No, we will not despond. We have the advantage of a good education, and it will be hard indeed if we cannot earn our bread by our industry."

The brother and sister were inspired with courage by the resolve to which they had thus come. The tears no longer stood in their eyes, their hearts were no longer smitten with sadness. They had a fond reliance upon each other; they had faith in Heaven. Youth, moreover, is not the age which is prone to despair, and thus they were even happy. As they proceeded homeward they discussed the plans which they should immediately pursue. They agreed that it would be no longer prudent to occupy a lodging at twenty-five shillings a week, and they decided on speaking at once to Mrs. Macaulay about giving it up. When they reached Mortimer Street, their landlady, who was somewhat anxiously on the lookout for them, hastened to open the front door, and invited them into her own parlour. They frankly explained their position, expressed their desire to remove as speedily as possible into a cheaper lodging, and with equal candour informed Mrs. Macaulay that they were now entirely dependent on themselves. They possessed a good stock of clothes, and they had some fourteen or fifteen pounds in hand, besides a few articles of jewelry of some little value.

"Well, my poor children," said Mrs. Macaulay, "I am sure I am exceedingly sorry for you, and if there is anything in the world I can do to help you, it shall be done. I know a very worthy widow woman who lives in a small house in Park Street, Camden Town, and I happen to be aware that her lodgings are at this very moment to let. You would get two nice rooms for ten shillings a week, and you may give me as a reference. As for your lodgings here, I won't be hard upon you, considering how you are situated.

You have just entered a new week, besides which I am entitled to another clear week's notice, but we will say nothing about the notice, and therefore if you pay me the week I shall be satisfied. I should however advise you to leave as soon as you can, — not, my dear children, that I want to get rid of you, but because the sooner you begin to economize in every way, the better for yourselves. And so, miss, you would like to get needlework? Well, and very praiseworthy, too. I should recommend you to apply to Mr. Samuel Emanuel, the great clothier in the City. Any one will tell you where it is, and you are certain to get employment there. But as for you, Master Ashton, I really am at a loss what to suggest. If I hear of anything, I will let you know. And now let me offer you each a glass of wine and a piece of cake, and then you had better go and see Mrs. Giles in Park Street at once."

Mrs. Macaulay was gratefully thanked for all the advice she had tendered, but the proffered refreshments were declined, as the twins were resolved to delay not a moment in carrying out their new plans. They accordingly set off again through the Regent's Park to Camden Town, and when they were gone, Mrs. Macaulay, who never let the grass grow under her feet, put up in her window a card announcing "Furnished Lodgings to Let." She experienced a slight twinge of conscience at having bargained for the twenty-five shillings for the rent of the current week, seeing that it was only just entered upon, and that the orphans would most likely move away in the evening or early on the morrow, so that she would have the chance of letting her rooms again at once. But she tranquillized that remorseful feeling by the reflection that she might have demanded a clear week's notice, or, in default thereof, an additional sum of twenty-five shillings. And then, too, the offer of the cake and wine was another salve for her conscience. It was true that it had been declined, but it was the young people's lookout, the offer had not been the less made, and she was enabled to congratulate herself on her own generosity. So, altogether, Mrs. Macaulay came to the conclusion that she had acted kindly rather than with harshness, and she proceeded to regale herself with the good things which had been refused by the orphans.

In about a couple of hours they returned, having made arrangements with Mrs. Giles, and they began to pack up their things for the purpose of removing that very same evening.

It was about nine o'clock, their boxes were all in readiness, and a cab was at the door to receive the luggage and bear the orphans away to their new and much humbler home. They flung a last look around the apartments which they were now quitting, to assure themselves that they were leaving nothing of their own behind, and as their eyes met, a sentiment of sadness simultaneously smote them both,— an identity of feeling to the effect that it seemed as if they were suddenly going down in the world, or, at all events, that the battle of life was now about to commence. But they embraced each other, and again were they cheered by that profound fondness which inspired mutual trustfulness and reliance, and hand in hand they issued forth from the sitting-room. They descended the stairs, and just as they reached the landing of the first floor, the door of the front apartment opened, and Mr. Redcliffe, enveloped in his cloak, and with his hat on his head, appeared upon the threshold, he being about to go forth. His dark eyes were at once riveted upon the brother and sister, and there was something about them which immediately inspired him with a strong interest on their behalf.

" I presume," he said, " that you are my fellow lodgers, of whom the landlady spoke to me this morning in such pleasing terms? "

Christian answered to the effect that he and his sister had hitherto lodged in the house, but that now they were about to remove elsewhere.

" Indeed! " said Mr. Redcliffe, in a melancholy tone. " I am sorry for that. It would have pleased me to form your acquaintance."

But having thus spoken, he bowed, and hurrying abruptly down the stairs, issued forth from the house. Yet the bow was one of well-bred courtesy, accompanied by a melancholy smile, and with a look plainly showing the interest which even in a few swift brief minutes had been inspired in him by the appearance of the twins.

" He is a strange man, a very strange man," said Mrs. Macaulay, who, standing at the foot of the stairs at the time to bid the orphans good-bye, had overheard what just passed.

" He is enormously rich, however, and that is a great consolation, for I am not usually fond of eccentric people. And now farewell, my young friends; and whenever you happen to be passing, do just drop in and tell me how you are getting on. But mind and don't forget Mr. Samuel Emanuel, Miss Ashton."

The orphans took their leave of Mrs. Macaulay, entered the cab, and were driven away toward their new home.

CHAPTER XV

THE EASTERN LADY

The scene changes to a small but exceedingly neat villa residence in the neighbourhood of Notting Hill. It stood considerably apart from the other dwellings that were nearest, and in the midst of a somewhat spacious garden, which was surrounded by a wall, with the exception of that part which fronted the road, and where there were iron railings. But within these railings the evergreens and shrubs were so thickly grouped and were so high as to form as complete a barrier against observation from passers-by as if the wall itself had been continued there. Two iron gates opened upon a semicircular carriage-sweep; the lawn, the gardens, and the gravel walks were in excellent order. On one side of the house were the stables, on the other side a large conservatory, filled with rare exotics. The windows of the dwelling had all Venetian blinds, and these, especially in the drawing and dining rooms, were usually kept closed throughout the day as well as the night. The villa was approached by a by-road leading out of the main one which intersects Notting Hill, and from which the villa itself was about half a mile distant. So few were the persons who ever passed along that by-road — unless it were labourers to and from their work — that Shrubbery Villa, as the place was called, was in a comparatively perfect seclusion on that particular outskirt of the multitudinous metropolis. Thus the occupants were sufficiently far removed from the observation of any curious neighbours, and for any one courting such seclusion, it was the very place to enjoy it.

We have spoken of it as it might be seen in the daytime, but it is in the evening, when the veil of darkness was upon the earth, that we are about to introduce our readers to a portion of its interior.

An apartment on the first floor, at the back of the drawing-room, and therefore looking on the garden in the rear, was fitted up in the most exquisite style. This style was altogether Oriental, for, instead of chairs, there was a continuous range of ottomans against the walls, interrupted only by the doorway in one direction and by the casement in another. The Venetian blinds were closed outside that casement, and within, heavy folds of the richest crimson drapery kept out the slightest current of air. A lamp, suspended to the ceiling, shed a soft roseate light through the transparent medium of a pink-tinted globe of glass. The atmosphere was warm and perfumed, but neither heated nor sickly. It was just such a warmth as was grateful on an October evening, and such a perfume as was refreshing, for it exhaled from flowers artistically arranged in costly vases. Some of those flowers were of that rare exotic kind which are seldom seen in this country, and then only in the conservatories of wealthy mansions. The mantelpiece was covered with superb ornaments, all of an Oriental kind; the central table displayed the most curious as well as the most costly luxuries of Eastern art.

But who was the occupant of this apartment at once so sumptuous and so elegant? Whose form was it that sat half-reclined upon the crimson draperies of an ottoman? A female, the reader may be assured, for nought save feminine taste could preside over the appointments of that charming retreat. She was a lady of about thirty years of age, and though the duskiness of her complexion indicated her Oriental origin, yet the warm, languid clime to which she belonged had not in any way marred or impaired the dazzling grandeur of her beauty. Her costume was of extraordinary richness, and well fitted for the place in which we find her. It was in some respects a fanciful dress, for those who are best acquainted with the apparel of different nations could scarcely ascribe it to any one in particular. The taste of the wearer had evidently studied to blend all those details of costume which, belonging to different parts of the East, were most elegant and becoming in such combination. And that same taste, too, had so exquisitely presided over these arrangements that there was nothing incongruous in the general effect.

A sort of caftan, of purple velvet, jewelled and embroidered, formed the upper garment, coming up nearly to the throat and reaching down almost to the knees, confined at the waist with a diamond clasp of incalculable price, and again fastened by a similar though smaller brooch at the throat itself. The interval remaining open would have left the bosom almost completely bare, were it not for an under-garment of embroidered blue silk, which reached up to the middle of the bust, but still left revealed to the eye no inconsiderable portion of those superb contours. The arms were bare to the shoulder, and they might have been thought somewhat too robust were it not for their faultless sculptural modelling. They were circled with bracelets studded with gems, and of the most curious workmanship. The hands of this lady were of extraordinary beauty in respect to their chiseling: the fingers were long and tapering, the nails exquisitely almond-shaped, and of a pellucid pink.

But we must continue with the costume. She wore satin trousers of a pale pink, covered with the richest lace. They were full, in the Oriental style, and were tied just below the swell of the leg, bulging out so as to conceal the robust proportions of the limbs, but the admirable symmetry thereof might be judged by the faultless modelling of the ankles and the feet. Those ankles were bare, for she wore no stockings, and the feet were thrust into delicate red morocco slippers, braided, and ornamented with pearls. The first glance at this lady, as she lounged half-reclining against the flocculent massiveness of the crimson-coloured cushions, would show the most superficial observer that no corset imprisoned her fine form. But then, no observer who had the good fortune to be admitted into her presence could possibly be a superficial one; he would survey her until his eyes had embraced every fanciful peculiarity of her garb and every charm of her person. He would see, therefore, that if she wore no corset, neither did she require any. No artificial support was needed for those contours which remained, in their richness and firmness, where nature had placed them, like those of a sculptured effigy, yet with the rising and sinking which denoted the animation of the living form. Neither did she need the accessories of art to set off the rounded and flowing outlines of her figure; its own symmetrical proportions imparted the finest shapeliness to the dress, which in its turn so well became them and sat them off to such advantage. She was not above the middle height of woman, and yet she appeared taller on account of her remarkably well-modelled figure and her apparel, as well as from the statuesque elegance and graceful majesty of her gait and carriage.

Thus far have we described the occupant of that room of Oriental luxury. But we must endeavour to render equal justice, by means of minutest detail, to the gorgeous splendour of her personal charms. We have already said that her complexion was of Eastern duskiness, but yet it had nought of gipsy swarthiness; it might be better likened to that of the Spaniard or Italian when in its darkest shade of bistre, yet with a skin perfectly transparent, and the warm blood showing through as it mantled with richest carnation tint upon the cheeks. Perhaps the hue of her complexion would be even still better understood if we describe it as a clear pale brown, for it had in it none of the sallowness which blends with the olive skin, and the skin itself had all the fineness and polish of a youthful freshness still adhering to a mature and voluptuous womanhood. The reader may have expected to learn that she wore an Oriental turban upon her head, but it was not so. A golden network, curiously interwoven with diamonds and pearls, — the entire ornament itself constituting a fortune, — rested lightly upon that head, but the hair was not gathered up beneath the network; it was parted in the middle with a careful exactitude, and flowed down in long, heavy tresses upon her shoulders and her back. Dark as night was that hair, black as jet, too, with no gloss upon it; yet was it neither harsh nor coarse, but as soft as silk, without wave or curl, save and except toward the extremity of the luxuriant tresses, and there the curl was rich and natural. Her forehead was not high, but yet expansive enough to give dignity to the countenance; the nose was perfectly straight, the nostrils of the tint of the rose-leaf. The upper lip was short, and both lips appeared to have been cut by the sculptor's chisel into their classical perfection; the shape of the mouth, when the whole face was in a state of repose or of seriousness, was that of Cupid's bow. The chin was delicately rounded and the countenance formed a complete oval. The eyes were large and dark, full of a languishing lustre, the orbs set in whites of that bluish tint which seems like mother-of-pearl. The eyebrows were magnificently arched, — the lashes of exceeding length, and forming the richest fringes that ever shaded those orbs which are at once the mirror and the artillery of woman's soul. When the mouth, which was so exquisitely formed, parted its rich red lips, teeth were disclosed which were whiter than ivory and faultlessly even. If the hand of this superb creature disturbed the luxuriant masses of hair on either side of her head, a small well-folded ear would be revealed, and thus in every respect was she a perfect model of Oriental splendour and loveliness, combined in that one female form.

It was between nine and ten o'clock in the evening — as we have already stated — that we introduce our readers to the occupant of that elegantly furnished apartment within the walls of Shrubbery Villa. The lady herself seemed to be profoundly pensive at one interval, then somewhat excited and anxious at another. Several times in the space of a quarter of an hour did she consult an elegant watch, set around with diamonds, and which being retained by a massive gold chain, she took from within the bosom of her caftan. Every now and then, too, her eyes — usually of so melting and languid a lustre — would flash with sudden fires, as if reflecting an inward impatience of the soul; and once when she had consulted her watch, she murmured, in some Oriental tongue, " Time passes, and he comes not."

But the voice in which she spoke these few words, and so lowly to herself, was of a rich flutelike harmony that would have given a charm to any language, even the harshest and the most discordant. It was a voice which, once heard, never could be forgotten, — one of those feminine voices which sink down into the very soul like the last notes of a strain of music, leaving rapture and ecstasy behind, yet half-subdued and kept under by the hope of catching the delicious sound again.

Presently this lady agitated a silver bell which lay near her, and a Hindu ayah, or female dependent, entered the room. This woman was about five and twenty, tall, slender, and beautifully formed, with the well-knit symmetry and the lithe elasticity of a bayadere. Her countenance, too, — though many, many shades darker than the complexion of her mistress, — was exceedingly handsome. Her eyes were so full of fire that they literally appeared to burn, so that it was pain as well as pleasure to gaze upon those magnificent orbs. Her lips were thin, of a vivid scarlet, and revealing teeth which though somewhat large were of the same polished whiteness and admirable evenness as those of the lady herself. Her features were small and regular; her hair was of jettiest blackness, without the slightest gloss, without natural wave or curl, and falling in long straight masses upon her shoulders and her back. Yet there was nothing ungraceful, much less ugly, in the effect produced by that straight hair. She was dressed in the usual white linen garb which properly belonged to her sex and position, or we might say, to her caste. But she had no covering upon her head beyond the natural one of her coal-black hair. Like her mistress, she wore no stay nor corset; nor needed she any. Upright as a dart, every movement, as she walked, was characterized by a willowy elasticity, with ease and lightness. Her arms and the lower part of her legs were bare; the former were circled with plain gold bracelets, the latter with anklets of the same material and fashion. Her feet were thrust into plain Oriental slippers, and so light was her tread that those feet scarcely seemed to sink into the rich thickness of the carpet.

Entering the room with downcast eyes, and with an air of such profound respect as a slave might be expected to exhibit toward a queen, yet with that complete drawing-up of the loosely attired untrammelled form, which was habitual, she advanced toward her mistress, who spoke a few words, and the ayah, with a graceful inclination of the head, glided out of the room. In a few minutes she returned, carrying a massive silver salver, on which was an exquisitely cut glass containing some refreshing beverage, such as lemonade or sherbet. This she presented, with one knee bent down, to her mistress, who drank the contents of the glass at a draught, for she was evidently parched with the effect of internal agitation. From the same cause she felt heated, and on another word being spoken, the Hindu woman proffered the lady a fan made of the richly coloured plumage of Oriental birds, and the handle of which was studded with gems.

" It is near ten o'clock, Sagoonah? " said the lady, inquiringly, " or does my watch err? " but we should observe that her conversation with the ayah was in an Eastern tongue.

" It is near ten o'clock, may it please your Highness," was the dependent's response.

" Hush! no Highness here," said the princess, for such indeed she was; then with a gracious smile she added, " But I forgot that we were speaking in our own native language. Tell me, Sagoonah, how like you this strange country? "

" I have seen so little of it," was the response given by the ayah, and this time she was cautious not to address her mistress in a manner becoming her rank, " that it would perhaps be wrong to pronounce an opinion. But I like any country where it suits you to dwell, and so long as I remain with you it is immaterial where."

" Yet you must have already formed an opinion," resumed the princess, " relative to this country of the great English people. Tell me frankly, apart from any feeling of devotion toward myself, to what conclusion it is that you have thus come? "

Sagoonah reflected for a few moments, and with downcast eyes; then suddenly raising those brilliant orbs, she said, decisively, " Yes, I like England now."

At this moment a knock and ring were heard at the front door; the princess started perceptibly, and made a hasty sign to Sagoonah, who again glided from the apartment. The moment the door closed behind her, the princess experienced a still stronger access of trouble than she had previously displayed; something like a shiver of anxiety and suspense passed over her, but the next instant her magnificent countenance brightened up with hope and joyous expectation. The door opened, and Mr. Redcliffe was ushered into that apartment.

The princess made a movement as if she would have risen from the ottoman where she was seated, and would have flown toward him, but she repressed that evident inclination, she remained where she was, and with her head partially bent down, she surveyed the visitor with a look that was full of fondness as well as mournful deprecation, and which likewise seemed to implore pardon and mercy at his hands. And he, on his side, remained standing for nearly a minute close by the door, his tall form enveloped in his ample cloak, — that form which was so upright, so well knit, and so commanding. His dark eyes were fixed half-severely, half-reproachfully upon the princess, but it was evident that there was the influence of constraint upon both, and that neither knew how to begin addressing the other.

"At length we meet again," said the princess, in a low, tremulous voice. "You received my summons, and you have come."

"Summons!" echoed Mr. Redcliffe, for a moment drawing himself up haughtily. "Remember, Princess Indora, that you are not now in a country where you can coerce or command. If you behold me here, it is that I have come voluntarily, and in obedience to no power save that of my own will."

"You perhaps have a right to upbraid me," said Indora, in a voice that was tremulous and mournful, "but it would be generous if you were to abstain."

"I will do so," rejoined Redcliffe, speaking more gently, and even as if he regretted the sort of half-rebuke which he had just now administered, "because, if I experienced some evil at the hands of your royal father and yourself, I likewise received some kindness."

The Princess Indora made a sign for him to sit down. He slowly put off his cloak, and placed himself upon the ottoman, but at such a distance from the lady that she flung upon him a rapid glance of tender reproach.

We must observe that the conversation which we have just recorded had passed in the same language in which Indora had discoursed with Sagoonah, and that Redcliffe spoke it with proficient ease and fluency.

"Is it possible," he went on to ask, "that your Highness has come to England for the sole purpose described in the letter which I received at my new lodging this afternoon?"

"For what other purpose could I come?" asked the princess. "Yes, it is true, Clement Redcliffe, that I have followed you to your own native land for the object described in my letter. I speak frankly. Love has made me bold before; it renders me not a coward now, — for I glory in that love which I feel for you. Do you require any additional proof than those words which I addressed to you, those offers which I made to you, and the whole tenor of my conduct toward you, when far away in my native land? You have that proof in the fact that I have undertaken and accomplished this long, long journey, that I have travelled under a feigned name, veiling my princely rank beneath a semblance of mediocrity and obscurity; I have come with but three faithful dependents, and I was resolved never to rest until I discovered you. Accident made me acquainted with the circumstance that you had been living at a particular hotel; this day I learned that you had returned thither, but that you had removed elsewhere."

Redcliffe had listened with visible pain to this speech, which was delivered with an admixture of mournfulness and enthusiasm, — mournfulness at the coldness of his demeanour when they had met, and exultation at all that she had accomplished for the love that she bore him. And on his side, he was pained because his soul was naturally too generous not to compassionate the woman who had thus formed so extraordinary a passion for him, — a passion which he however could not reciprocate, and he knew not in what terms to convey a decision which should dash to the ground all the hopes she had entertained.

"You do not speak to me," she went on to say; "you are cold and distant. I half-feared that it would be so; yet I endeavoured to persuade myself to the contrary. I reasoned that you could not fail to be touched by these last proofs of love which I have given you, and that a feeling of sympathy might possibly beget a softer and deeper sentiment."

"Indora," responded Redcliffe, in the mildest tones of his rich, sonorous voice, "this is an infatuation which is truly incomprehensible. I have no vanity that can possibly be flattered," he added, with some degree of bitterness, "and therefore I deceive not myself when I look in the mirror; nor would the adulation of the veriest sycophant — if I were a king, like your father, to-morrow — have power to deceive me. I know what I am, — a man prematurely old, my hair turning gray, baldness coming, my complexion sallowed by illness and bronzed by the torrid sun of your native clime — "

"Speak not thus," interrupted Indora, gazing upon Redcliffe with a look of genuine and ineffable tenderness. "Even if you be as you describe yourself, you are not so in my eyes. Were your hair white, were your face wrinkled, were your form bowed with age, I should still love you as fondly and as well. Yes, I should still behold you only as you were when first I saw you long years back, in my girlhood, and therefore should I love you. Nor is it only that the image of your personal beauty of that time is so indelibly impressed upon my heart; it is that the brilliancy of your intellect filled me with admiration, your manners charmed me, your knowledge enlightened me."

She ceased for a moment, and then, with a sudden transition from one language to another, she went on to speak, but now in the English tongue, and with a fluency, an eloquence, a precision of accent, and a correctness of idiom that were truly remarkable.

"For all these reasons, Clement Redcliffe, do I love you. My happiness now depends upon the next word which must fall from your lips. Ponder well ere you speak that word, if it be to cause the wreck of a fellow creature's happiness. Ah! there was another reason which made me love you, and if I forgot to mention it ere now, it notwithstanding is far from being the least. It is that you taught me the sublime doctrines of your own religion, that you weaned me from paganism and raised me up to be a Christian. You eradicated from my mind all the detestable prejudices with which it had been imbued; you reclaimed me from a condition of mental darkness; you guided me into the paths of light. And think you that the gratitude wherewith you inspired me was not certain to expand and deepen into love? Yes, and more. You taught me your own native language, — that language in which I am now addressing you."

"Princess," responded Redcliffe, now also speaking in the English language, "it cuts me to the very soul to hear all these things flow from your lips, for I am not naturally stern, cruel, and pitiless, and yet there is a word that must be spoken, but to which I tremble to give utterance."

"No, no, breathe it not," ejaculated Indora, with a sudden start and with dilating eyes; "breathe it not, I entreat you! It would be my death-blow. Think on all that I have done for your sake, — my native land abandoned, a strange and far-off clime willingly and gladly sought, — think of all this, I say, — and give me some hope, some encouragement, I beseech and implore you."

"Indora," answered Redcliffe, now summoning all his fortitude to his aid, and endeavouring to crush the more generous feelings of his nature beneath the iron heel of his own strong will, "it is for your own sake that I must speak promptly and decisively. I would not insult you — I would not wound you, by returning a written response to your own letter; I therefore resolved to come personally, though foreseeing that the interview would be a painful one. Now, arm yourself with all that courage which is naturally your own, call to your aid all that strength of mind with which Providence has endowed you. In loving me, you have fixed your affections on one who cannot love you in return; would you have me, then, proclaim the contrary? It would be a falsehood."

"If you love me not," answered Indora, sadly and softly, "and you have often, too often told me this much before, at least you may have compassion upon me. My own love might inspire you with sympathy, and sympathy is a tender feeling, akin to love itself."

"Indora, the truth must indeed be spoken, stern though it may be, pitiless though it may appear. I cannot — I dare not marry you. And now, I beseech and implore that you will summon all Christian fortitude and resignation to your aid."

The superb head of the Indian princess drooped slowly down upon her bosom, and her arms, with the hands clasped, drooped likewise languidly over her magnificent dress. It seemed as if she had sunk into despair, and that all sense of the possibility of earthly happiness had left her. Redcliffe was evidently moved; from the very bottom of his soul he pitied her, and whatsoever sense remained in his memory of that past evil sustained at her hands, and to which he had alluded, it all died away within him. He was too magnanimous at that moment to entertain any other feeling than one of profound compassion. He lingered; he thought that he was bound to say something more, — something soul-strengthening if not hopefully cheering, something mentally fortifying, if not tenderly encouraging. But all in an instant smitten with the conviction that the scene ought to end as speedily as possible, he abruptly threw on his cloak, and exclaiming, "Farewell, Indora! may you be happy yet," was hastening to leave the room.

"No, one word ere we part," cried the princess, springing toward him, and her exquisitely shaped hand grasped his arm. "One word, Clement Redcliffe, for we cannot separate thus."

"What would you say?" asked Redcliffe, with averted looks, and with visible impatience to take his departure.

" Only this," she responded: " that you will give yet one week's grave and serious reflection to that subject whereon you have ere now pronounced a decision. For one week let that decision be recalled. It is only a delay of seven poor days which I ask — "

" And which can effect no change, princess, in my sentiments," added Redcliffe, mournfully but firmly.

" Interrupt me not," ejaculated Indora, almost with vehemence, " but listen to what I have to say. One week's grace I demand at your hands. Pledge yourself that on the eighth evening hence you will return to me at the same hour, and that you will then pronounce your decision. Whatever it be, I will respect it."

" You promise to respect it? " exclaimed Redcliffe, now turning his eyes inquiringly upon Indora's countenance.

" I will respect it," she answered, and at the same moment her long taper fingers were withdrawn from the grasp which had tightened upon his arm, so that he was now free to depart, without violently disengaging himself from her hand.

" Then I will come," he said, and the next instant the door of the room closed behind him.

He traversed the landing, which was filled with costly vases exhaling perfumes, he sped down the richly carpeted staircase, he reached the hall, where the ayah Sagoonah was waiting to afford him egress. He snatched up his hat from the hall-table, and as he turned toward the door, his looks suddenly encountered those of the Hindu woman. For an instant he was struck with a strange unknown sensation, mysterious amazement blending with a sort of vague terror, as he caught the wondrous brilliancy of those regards which flashed upon him for an instant, and the next were withdrawn. He knew Sagoonah well, — had known her indeed for years in her own native clime, but never did he recollect that she had looked at him in that way before.

He said not a word, but hastened forth from the house, and as he proceeded along the by-road, there was a certain trouble in his mind while thinking of those burning looks which had been flung upon him like a spell, and which now appeared to haunt him. He quickened his pace, as if to outstrip the various painful and conflicting thoughts which were agitating in his brain; he reached the main road, he proceeded onward in the direction of the metropolis. He soon came within the sphere of brilliant gas-lamps, but brighter than all — and ominous too — was the impression left upon his soul by Sagoonah's haunting eyes.

CHAPTER XVI

MR. SAMUEL EMANUEL

In one of the principal streets of that perfect maze or network of thoroughfares, so narrow and so crowded, which constitute the City of London, stood the immense establishment of Mr. Samuel Emanuel, the great clothier.

The reader will not require to be informed that this individual was of the Hebrew race; nor, if we be compelled to say anything to his disparagement, must it be presumed that we are holding him up as an invariable type of his nation. It is nothing of the sort. We yield to no one, we may without vanity affirm, in enlightened opinions with respect to the Jews, and we have the conviction that there are many excellent persons amongst them, as well as many admirable traits in their national character. But there are good and bad of all kinds and species in this world, — good and bad Christians, good and bad Mussulmans, good and bad Buddhists, and therefore why not bad Israelites as well as good ones? We will even go farther, and we will affirm that within the range of our own experience we have met persons professing Christianity, of a viler stamp of rascality, and capable of more unmitigated scoundrelism, than ever we discovered a Jew to be guilty of.

Mr. Samuel Emanuel was the proprietor, as we have said, of an immense clothing mart. He had spent thousands and thousands of pounds in advertising it, and had puffed himself up into an amazing notoriety. Not a wooden hoarding about London that was not covered with his placards. If you took your seat in an omnibus, a shower of little books, neatly stitched, would suddenly rain in upon you, and on picking one up, you immediately recognized the superb frontage of Mr. Samuel Emanuel's establishment in the form of a woodcut upon the cover. If you went for a walk in the fields in the environs of London, your eye would catch the name, calling, and address of Mr. Samuel Emanuel upon every fence and on every dead wall. If you looked in the advertising columns of the newspapers, your eye would suddenly rest on a string of ill-measured lines, by courtesy called "poetry," and if you had the curiosity or patience to read the wretched doggerel, you would thence evolve a series of the most extravagant puffs of Mr. Samuel Emanuel's establishment. There could be no doubt in your mind that while Mr. Samuel Emanuel considered the sovereign to be the first personage in the realm, he entertained the pleasing conviction that he himself was the second. Talk of your first-rate authors, your eminent artists, or your great sculptors, talk of your renowned warriors by sea or by land, — what was any one of these in comparison with the far-famed Mr. Samuel Emanuel?

And yet, if you walked into his establishment and beheld this great personage, you would find him to be as unprepossessing a fellow as you could possibly meet in a day's walk. Scarcely of the middle height, ill made and ungainly, he sought to set himself off by all the accessories of his own tailoring craft. No trouser pattern in his own window would be more outrageous than the one selected for his pantaloons. He would wear a dress coat, with rich velvet collar and lapels, as early as eight o'clock in the morning, and his waistcoat would be of the gaudiest silk pattern. As for his neckerchief, it would be sure to correspond in its flaunting vulgarity with the rest of his attire, and would be fastened in front with some inconceivably outrageous breastpin, — perhaps an enormous carbuncle clutched in a golden fist. Festooning over his gaudy waistcoat there would be three or four watch-chains of different fashions and degrees of massiveness, and his dirty, stumpy, ill-shaped fingers, with very horrible nails, would be decorated with enough rings to fill a small tray, such as those whose contents purchasers are invited to inspect in jewelers' shops. As for his countenance, it had all the characteristics of his race, but with an expression of mingled hardness and meanness, of paltry cunning and avaricious greed, together with a faculty for the sudden assumption of a vulgar insolence, that might readily be supposed to characterize such an individual.

His wife was a perfect giantess, with large coarse features, an enormously stout shape, and an air of brazen effrontery which she seldom took the trouble to subdue. There was a certain showiness about her, — a sort of Flemish mare kind of handsomeness, which to some little extent was striking, and Mr. Emanuel considered her one of the finest specimens of the female sex. For this uxoriousness he was rather to be honoured than otherwise, and therefore we record it as no imputation to his detriment.

In respect to the establishment itself, we need only observe that it was splendidly fitted up, that the shop-windows were of the largest-sized plate glass, that the lamps were almost endlessly multiplied, and that as the show-rooms were crammed with goods, so the various shopmen were well-nigh countless in each particular department. But truth compels us to add that the garments which Mr. Samuel Emanuel had for sale were very much like himself, — dashing and fine, but intrinsically mean and trumpery. Indeed, the cheapest of his articles would prove the dearest bargain that a purchaser could possibly possess himself of; they were very much after the same description as Peter Pindar's razors, which were made to sell, and not to cut, for Mr. Emanuel's garments were made for disposal, and not for wear.

To this establishment was it that, at about eleven in the forenoon of the day after the twins' removal to their new lodging, Christina bent her way, in company with her brother. He however remained outside while she entered, but just within the door she stopped short, under the influence of a sudden timidity which seized upon her. At the same moment she heard voices speaking, but those who were thus engaged in conversation were concealed from her view, as she was hidden from theirs, by an array of gaudy dressing-gowns for gentlemen, hung upon frames so contrived as to show off the particular fit and appearance of the several garments. Christina could not for the life of her move another step forward at the instant; she was overwhelmed with bashfulness; there was a sickening sensation at her heart, for she felt as if she were there under almost mendicant circumstances. It was no wonder that the delicate sensibilities of the young girl were thus poignantly touched by the new position to which Mr. Preston's plight had reduced her, and tears starting into her eyes, she was compelled to linger where she was in order to control and tranquillize her feelings. She thus unavoidably became a listener to some portion of the discourse which was going on behind the array of dressing-gowns.

"Well, Mr. Solomons," said a coarse masculine voice, speaking with the half-patronizing, half-stern accents of authority, "so far so good. But we must think of at least a hundred other means of keeping the emporium incessantly before the public. Ah! by the bye, have you seen about some ragged boy or wretched-looking woman, to fling a stone at the pane which got accidentally cracked yesterday?"

"Yes, sir, it is all right," answered Mr. Solomons, who, we may as well at once inform our readers, was Mr. Emanuel's principal and confidential clerk. "I succeeded yesterday in getting hold of the most pitiable object that ever was seen in female shape, and she will be in the street presently to bang a large brickbat right against the glass."

"Excellent," exclaimed Mr. Samuel Emanuel, chuckling with a coarse laugh. "The pane, you see, my dear, was cracked, and therefore we should be obliged to have a new one, so that we really lose nothing by getting it smashed completely for us."

"Oh, I understand, you cunning rogue!" cried Mrs. Emanuel, in a great, rough voice, as if it were a grenadier speaking. "But what will follow?—though I can pretty well guess."

"Please, ma'am," said Mr. Solomons, "I have arranged it all. The woman agrees to break the pane, and of course she is equally agreeable to be given into custody. She will go before the lord mayor, and whine out a piteous tale about distress having compelled her to do it, that she might get herself sent to prison, as she has such a dreadful horror of the workhouse."

"And then, you know, my dear," resumed Mr. Emanuel, taking up the thread of the explanations, "as I shall have to attend at the Mansion House to charge the woman, I shall of course appear to be very much affected at her tale; I shall express my regret that I gave her in charge, and I shall beg his lordship to let her off with a reprimand. The lord mayor of course will look grave and pompous, and will deliver himself of the usual tirade,—to the effect that persons can't be allowed to go smashing the windows of highly respectable tradesmen in the City of London, and he will send her to prison for seven days. So then I shall beg leave to hand to his lordship a couple of guineas for the poor woman's use when she comes out of gaol, and I shall tell her that if she can do needlework, she is to call upon me, when I will give her plenty of employment at good wages."

"To be sure; that is the way to do it," said the obsequious Mr. Solomons. "But, beg pardon, sir, if you could possibly manage to squeeze out a tear — "

"I'll shed a dozen," exclaimed Mr. Emanuel. "And then, don't you see, my dear," he continued, again addressing his wife, "we shall have such a long report in all to-morrow's papers, and so nicely drawn up. Mr. Samuel Emanuel, the celebrated clothier, pane of plate glass smashed, value thirty pounds, Mr. Emanuel deeply affected, behaved most handsomely, two guineas, and promise of work, hum of applause in the court, which the usher did not attempt to repress, lord mayor himself much affected, not an unmoistened eye in the whole place. There, my dear, what do you think of that? Famous advertisement, and costs us nothing but the two guineas to the woman, and the five shillings I ordered Solomons to give as earnest-money when he made the arrangement."

"I took care to give it to her, sir," observed that confidential personage, "and I have no doubt the poor afflicted creature," he added, with a low ironical chuckle, "got amazingly drunk last night. But I have done more than this, sir; your orders about the boy who is to be run over by your advertising van are likewise carried out."

"Excellent," again cried the harsh voice of Mr. Emanuel. "Tell us all about it, Mr. Solomons."

"Well, sir, I made an arrangement with the boy's father, and agreed on the price for which his son's leg is to be broken, — a guinea down on the nail, five guineas after it is done, and the doctor's bill to be paid. He's a nice lad, about fourteen, very sharp, and soon understood the advantage of being run over, sir, by your advertising van."

"Of course," exclaimed Mr. Emanuel, "but the great advantage, though, will be reaped by us, I think. Another good puff, my dear, for the emporium, and better than all the advertisements in the world. Let me see? Shocking accident, poor boy run over by one of the numerous advertising vans of Mr. Samuel Emanuel, the eminent clothier, Mr.

Emanuel behaved in the handsomest manner, relieved the poor father's feelings to the utmost of his power, and has undertaken to provide for the boy for the rest of his life, — noble trait, that, in the character of Mr. Samuel Emanuel, the great clothier, outfitter for the colonies, army and navy tailor, etc."

"Yes, sir, these are the best ways of keeping yourself properly before the public," said Mr. Solomons.

"But what letter is it that you have got in your hand there," inquired the clothier's wife, "and which you were reading just now?"

"Oh, it's nothing, ma'am," replied Solomons. "Only a long rigmarole from that Mary Wright, you know —"

"Ah! the girl who worked so well, but who was in a consumption?" interjected Mrs. Emanuel. "And pray what does she want?"

"It's the old tale, ma'am," answered Solomons. "She declares she has worked herself to death in your service. She is now on her death-bed, without the necessaries of life, and begs and implores that you will — I think she says, for the love of God — send her a few shillings. She gives her address and courts inquiry into her case. Here it is! No. — Redcross Street."

"Ah! capital tale, no doubt," exclaimed Mr. Emanuel, with flippant coarseness, "but not a single penny will she get from us. Take no notice of the letter, Solomons."

"That is just the course, sir, I intended to adopt. Ah, by the bye, sir, I had nearly forgotten to mention that several of the slop-workers threaten to strike for an advance of wages. The women say they can't go on making shirts at three-halfpence apiece, finding their own needles and thread."

"What impudence," vociferated Mr. Emanuel; "let them strike and be hanged! There are plenty of others to take their place. Thank God there are thousands and thousands of poor devils of that class ever ready to come forward and fill up gaps. Ah! it's a blessed country to live in, where the laws keep the labour markets flooded with these pauperized wretches who are glad to work for any pittance. Deuce a bit! no rise in wages. Let them stick to their three-halfpence a shirt or go about their business. Ah! when I think of it. Solomons, write out a check for Malachi Lewis, for those six cases of champagne that came in yesterday."

" Yes, sir. There is one thing more that I have to mention. It's about Sarah Jones — "

" What! that pestering widow woman," interjected Mrs. Emanuel, " who always will come to the place with her three children, because she says she has no one in whose charge she can leave them, and though they are certainly kept tidy enough — "

" It's the same woman, ma'am," responded Solomons. " She came here just now to confess that she had pawned those two shooting-jackets she had to make up. She says that distress compelled her to do it, and that her landlady was going to turn her children and herself out into the streets at eleven o'clock at night when it was pouring with rain."

" And she has pawned my shooting-jackets," vociferated Mr. Emanuel, in a towering rage. " Let her be given into custody at once, Solomons. And you must appear for me before the magistrate. Of course you will say that I feel it to be a duty which I owe to society, that I do it on public grounds alone, and all that sort of thing. And now go and see about it without delay."

This conversation occupied in the delivery far less time than we have taken to record it. Christina had triumphed over her own peculiar sensibilities so far as they regarded herself, but only to have them most keenly awakened in respect to others. She had remained riveted to the spot by the discourse which she thus overheard. Its transitions from one subject to another had been successively fraught with a strange and fearful interest for the generous-hearted girl. The wretched woman whose misery and unscrupulousness were alike taken advantage of to procure the breaking of an already broken window, in order that the clothier might be paraded before the public, that poor boy whose very father had bargained in cold blood for him to sustain a serious injury, the dying girl who in working for the Emanuels had worked her own winding-sheet, and now vainly implored a pittance of relief, the unfortunate female slop-workers who were ground down to the very lowest infinitesimal fraction of wage, and who were to be remorselessly deprived of employment because they asked for a recompense at least a trifle above starvation-point, and last of all, the hapless widow woman who was to be given into custody and torn from the children, whom she evidently loved, for an offence to which real penury had driven her, but for which the clothier experienced no sympathy because the case presented not any features which he could turn into an available mode of puffery for himself and his emporium, — all these cases, coming thickly one upon the other, had filled the heart of Christina with mingled horror, astonishment, pity, and disgust. Therefore, even when her own peculiar feelings were overruled, she was kept riveted to the spot, a most painfully interested listener to a discourse which revealed the wrongs and sufferings of others.

She now stepped forward, and was immediately confronted by Mr. and Mrs. Emanuel, who were turning away from the spot where they had been discoursing with their managing man. Though Christina was neatly dressed, and had not the slightest appearance of poverty about her, yet the clothier and his wife were so accustomed to receive applications for work from respectable young women in reduced circumstances that they at once anticipated the object of her visit. The next moment, however, they thought they must be wrong, for a second glance at Christina's countenance showed that there was a flush of indignation upon it, mingled with as much abhorrence as it was in her delicate nature to display. They therefore awaited until she should explain her own business.

" I should be obliged to you," she said, " if you will give me the address of that poor widow woman of whom you have spoken, and I will at once hasten and furnish her with the means to set herself right toward you, so that you need not give her into custody."

The Jew and Jewess exchanged looks of rapid meaning with each other, and then the former, with an insolent air, exclaimed, " I suppose, young miss, you have been listening to what passed? "

" And pray," demanded Mrs. Emanuel, " what business have you to come sneaking into a place to play the eavesdropper? "

Christina's countenance became crimson; the flush of indignation previously upon it suddenly deepened into one of shame, as she was struck by her own imprudence in thus confessing that she had listened, but the avowal was inadvertently made in the strong excitement of feelings under which she was labouring at the moment.

"I will tell you frankly," she said, speedily recovering her presence of mind, "that I called for a specific purpose, and it was scarcely my fault that I overheard any portion of your discourse."

"And that specific purpose?" exclaimed Mr. Emanuel, bending his looks with insolent menace upon the young girl.

"I came to ask for work," she responded, her eyes sinking beneath the coarse regards of the clothier.

"Work, indeed!" he ejaculated with a sneering air and contemptuous chuckle; then leaning forward toward her, he added, with brutal insolence, "You sha'n't have any work from my establishment. I don't encourage sneaking, prying listeners."

"Work indeed!" shouted Mrs. Emanuel, in her great masculine voice, and putting her hands upon her hips, she said, "A pretty creature you are, to come gliding like a cat into a respectable house, just for all the world as if you meant to steal something. Who knows but that you have whipped up an article and have got it under your shawl?"

Christina's eyes for a moment threw a glance of indignant innocence at the coarse Jewess, but the next moment she burst into tears, and staggered back as if about to faint.

"Come, be off with you," said Mr. Emanuel, in the most brutal tone. "You are after no good here, and if you don't make yourself scarce, I shall precious soon send for a policeman."

Terrified by this threat, which she felt the cowardly ruffian was but too capable of carrying out, Miss Ashton issued forth from the shop, and on emerging into the street was instantaneously joined by her brother. Perceiving that she was in tears, and that she was much agitated, he naturally ascribed her emotions to disappointment in respect to that hope of obtaining work with which they had been flattering themselves, but when he came to learn everything that had passed, his indignation knew no bounds, his naturally fine spirit flamed up in a moment, and Christina experienced some difficulty in preventing him from going back to the emporium, to overwhelm the Jew and Jewess with reproaches for their brutal conduct toward his sister.

"It is useless, my dear Christian," she said, retaining him forcibly by the arm as they proceeded along the crowded street; "you would only get yourself into some embarassment. I implore you to tranquillize your feelings. Alas, I begin to comprehend that the power of money is immense and irresistible in this country. It constitutes colossal strength, while poverty is in itself abject weakness. Christian," said the young girl, after a pause, " is there nothing which suggests itself to your mind? "

" Yes, dear Christina," he at once responded, as if the very look which his beautiful twin sister had bent upon him transfused in an instant to his mind what was passing in her own. " We must go and relieve the dire necessities of that poor perishing creature. It is fortunate that you heard her address mentioned. Would that we also knew where to find the poor widow, that we might succour her likewise. Alas, our own resources are now limited enough, but still — but still," added Christian, with a world of sincere feeling in his looks and his accents, " we must spare something for the assistance of our fellow creatures."

The twins were suddenly cheered by the prospect of doing good, as well as by having the means to accomplish it, small though their succour might be. They inquired their way to Redcross Street, and finding the house which Christina had heard mentioned at the emporium, they ascertained from an old, harsh-featured, sordid-looking woman, who announced herself as the landlady, that there was a young person of the name of Mary Wright lodging at the place, but that as she could not pay her rent, and was dying, the workhouse authorities had been applied to that very day.

" Let me see her," said Christina, while Christian hastily whispered to his sister that he would await her in the street.

The landlady — thinking by the appearance of the twins that they came for a charitable purpose, and that the arrears of rent due to her would probably be paid — suddenly grew mighty civil, and she conducted Christina up a dark and dirty staircase to the very top of the house. Opening an attic door, she gave the young girl to understand that this was Mary Wright's room.

Christina entered. The attic was of the smallest size, and its appearance of the meanest poverty. Stretched upon a wretched flock mattress, which lay upon the boards in one corner, and covered with the scantiest bed clothing, lay a young woman whose years could scarcely yet have numbered one and twenty, in the very last stage of consumption. She was pale as a corpse, save and except with regard to a vivid hectic spot which seemed to burn upon either cheek. She was thin, — oh, so thin! It was complete emaciation; so that it appeared as if merely to raise that wasted, attenuated form would be to inflict excruciating pain, as the very bones might threaten to penetrate through the skin, for flesh upon them there was none. The attic was almost completely denuded of every necessary, and possessed not a single comfort. The dying creature was alone when Christina entered, — no relative, no nurse, no friendly female to attend upon her. Notwithstanding her frightful emaciation, notwithstanding the ravages which disease had worked upon her countenance, there were nevertheless sufficient traces of past beauty to indicate that she must have at one time possessed no ordinary degree of loveliness.

Christina gave her to understand that accident had made her acquainted with her condition, and that though her own means were limited (the generous girl said not how limited) she had come to proffer what little assistance she was enabled to afford. Mary Wright was for some time so suffocated by her emotions that she could not give utterance to a word, and the tears streamed from her eyes. At length she succeeded in expressing her deep gratitude, in a weak, dying voice and in broken accents, declaring that she had never expected to behold a friendly countenance gaze upon her again in this life.

Christina learned from her that about thirty shillings were owing to the landlady, and though the dying young woman proffered not the request in words, yet her plaintively appealing looks seemed to implore our heroine to save her from the threatened removal to the workhouse. This pledge Christina at once gave, and promising likewise to return in a few minutes, she hastened from the room.

The landlady was waiting upon the stairs, watching for Miss Ashton, in order to see what might turn up to her own advantage, and Christina at once liquidated from her slender purse the arrears of rent that were due. Then she continued her way down-stairs, and rejoined her brother in the street.

Christian had been waiting for her about a quarter of an hour, and during this interval a little incident had occurred which he had noticed, and which he presently mentioned to Christina. While walking to and fro in the street, he had beheld a posse of ragged-looking creatures emerge from a narrow, dirty court. These individuals consisted of a man dressed like a dilapidated journeyman carpenter, with a paper cap on his head, a woman having the appearance of the wife of an impoverished artisan, and a whole tribe of children whose rags and tatters scarcely covered their nakedness. At the first apparition of this wretched-looking party, Christian's hand was thrust into his pocket to clutch the first coin which his fingers might happen to encounter, in order to transfer it to the poor family, when something which occurred at the moment made him drop the coin again in a sort of stupefied amazement.

"Now, Bet," said the man, "mind you look like an honest woman for once in your life, and turn that gin-drinking air of yours into a precious dolefulness. And you brats, you, if you don't put on as much misery as possible, I sha'n't get enough to pay your parents for the hiring of you. Mind, Bet, the dodge is that we walked all the way from Liverpool and can't get no work whatsomever."

These were the words which had produced a sudden revulsion of feeling on the part of Christian, and had so suddenly made him drop the coin again to the bottom of his pocket. He at once saw that it was a gang of unprincipled impostors whom he had been about to relieve. They did not immediately catch sight of him, when they were issiung from the court, nor did they suspect that he overhead the injunctions given by the man, for no sooner was he perceived by them, than he was surrounded by the ragged horde of children, imploring alms in a whining tone, while their dirty little paws were stretched out toward him. At the same instant the man began to snivel forth a miserable tale, of how he was a carpenter out of work, how he and his dear wife and eight children, four of whom were small ones, had tramped all the way from Liverpool, never once sleeping in a bed and enduring every possible privation. Then the woman took up the strain, in a canting, whining, lugubrious tone, telling Christian how she had been brought up by kind parents, how she had been a good wife and a fond mother, how she had borne her husband thirteen children, of which five lay under the turf, and then she stopped short and appeared to cry bitterly. Christian had found himself so completely hemmed in by the posse of impostors that he had some difficulty in getting from their midst, and in his indignation at being thus regarded as an object on whom to practise their deception, he let drop a few words to make them aware of what he had caught from the man's own lips. Then the posse — from the man himself down to the youngest child — levelled at him the coarsest, filthiest abuse, and as he retreated in one direction, they took another, bending their way into a neighbouring street.

Such was the narrative which Christian gave Christina, when the latter had described to him the spectacle that had met her own eyes in the wretched attic she had been visiting. They proceeded to the nearest pastry-cook's, where they purchased some jelly; they bought some articles at a grocer's, and they ordered bread from a baker's. Then they returned into Redcross Street, and while Christian again waited for his sister, the latter ascended to Mary Wright's chamber. She now learned a piteous tale from the poor dying creature's lips, — a tale of an early orphanage and of total friendlessness, — of dependence upon her own resources, of bitter poverty resignedly endured, and in defiance of all the temptations which her beauty had brought in her way, of the insidious advance of consumption, and of poignant miseries and privations suffered when she was no longer enabled to work.

"Yesterday," said the poor creature in conclusion, "I exerted sufficient energy to write to those who had employed me, imploring assistance. It was in the direst despair that I thus addressed them, and with no real hope in my heart, for, alas! I know full well the hardness of their own hearts. They have not been moved toward me, but Heaven has sent me a ministering angel in the form of yourself."

Christina did not choose to sadden the poor dying creature more deeply than she was already afflicted, by explaining that it had come to her knowledge that her appeal to the Emanuels was treated with brutal heartlessness. She remained upwards of an hour with Mary Wright, doing all she could to conduce to her comfort, and forcing her to partake of the food which was purchased for her use. She promised to return on the following day, and received the warmest, most heartfelt expressions of gratitude from the sufferer's lips. Ere quitting the house, she sought another interview with the landlady, and putting some money into her hand, bade her show all possible attentions to the dying woman, — at the same time giving her the assurance that she should be rewarded in proportion as she obeyed these injunctions.

Christian was not wearied of waiting upwards of an hour for his sister's reappearance; he knew that she was engaged in a self-imposed task of true benevolence, and he would have cheerfully tarried ten times as long if it were necessary. Scarcely had Christina issued forth from the house, and just as she was taking her brother's arm, they both beheld a gentleman stop short and gaze upon them with an air of interest. He had evidently recognized them, and they too recognized him, for he was none other than Mr. Redcliffe. He at once perceived that there was sadness in Christina's looks, and that tears hung upon her long dark lashes, — the traces of that deep sorrow which she had experienced at the mournful narrative of Mary Wright.

" Wherefore are you thus depressed? " he inquired, somewhat abruptly, but with a courteous bow of recognition, as he glanced from one to the other.

" Because I have just left a scene which would move the hardest of hearts," replied Christina. " A young woman, crushed down by overwhelming toil, in the last stage of consumption — "

" And it is a deserving case? " asked Mr. Redcliffe, interrupting the young girl, while he still continued to contemplate both herself and her brother with a deep and mournful interest.

" Oh, yes, sir. It is a deserving case; there can be no doubt of it," exclaimed Christina, the tears gushing afresh from her eyes, as all she had seen and all she had heard sprang vividly up to her memory.

" Then it shall be inquired into," answered Redcliffe, and with another courteous bow, he passed abruptly on his way.

The twins proceeded slowly along the street, and presently they looked back to see if Mr. Redcliffe had turned to call at the house, but he was just disappearing around the corner of another street, and the orphans knew not what to think, whether he had only said the case should be inquired into in order to cut short a tale which he cared not to hear, or whether the promise would be really fulfilled. As they continued their own way, Christina told her brother all that she

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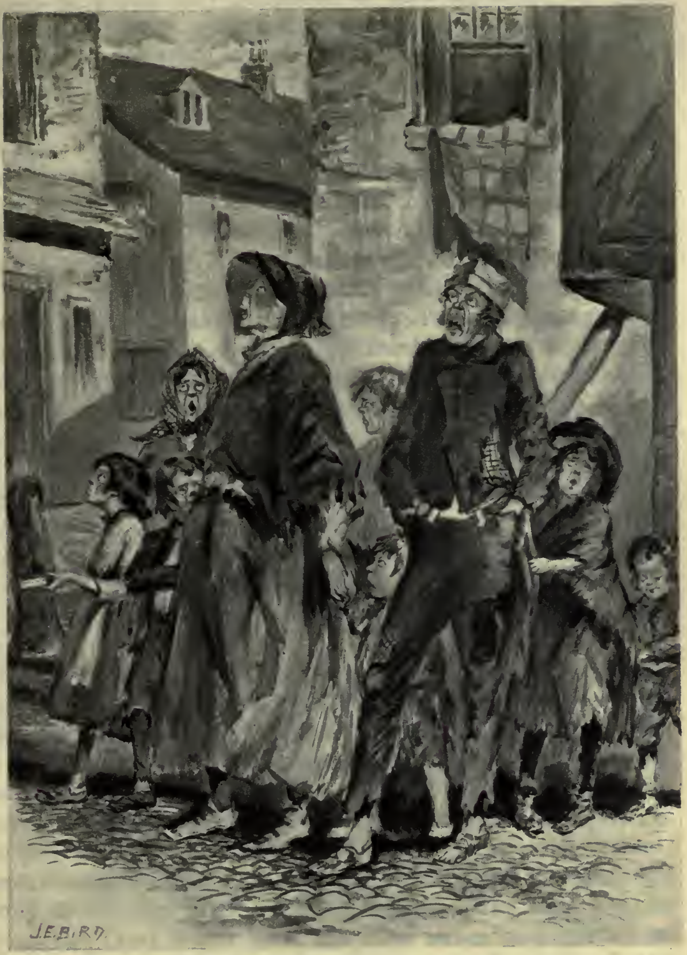
"SINGING AT THE VERY TOP OF THEIR VOICES"

Photogravure from original by Bird


J.E.BIRD.

had learned from Mary Wright, and it was with a profound sympathy that the youth listened to his sister's narrative.

They had threaded several streets in their progress toward a point at which they purposed to take an omnibus, when Christian suddenly pressed his sister's arm, and as she looked in the same direction on which his regards were fixed, she at once comprehended his meaning. There was the posse of ragged impostors, singing at the very top of their voices. The man had his hands thrust into the pockets of his dilapidated trousers, and his face was screwed up to as piteous an air of misery as could be well conceived. The woman, with mouth wide open, was gazing up into the air, dragging along a ragged urchin by each hand. A girl clung to the coat tails of the man, who passed as her father, and to her dress a little half-naked boy, scarcely five years of age, was holding on. On the right of the front rank, an impudent-looking minx of a girl, with an old cotton handkerchief about her head was staring up at a window and proffering a box of matches. In the rear an older girl and a boy — both with villainously hangdog countenances — were likewise doing their best to excite compassion. It needed but a partially scrutinizing glance to perceive that this tribe of children could, with scarcely any degree of possibility, belong to those who were passing themselves off as their parents, for not between any two of them was the slightest family similitude.

There they were, slowly making their way along the street, singing at the top of their discordant voices; and when the song temporarily ceased, the man whined forth the same tale he had already told to Christian, with this trifling difference, however, that he happened to substitute Portsmouth for Liverpool as the place whence he and his family had tramped up. Halfpence from the windows rattled down into the street; these were quickly snatched up by the children, who scudded about in all directions for the purpose. The man prayed "that the Lord might bless the kind ladies and gentlemen who thus assisted a poor mechanic out of employ," the woman dropped divers low curtseys, and the singing recommenced. It did not seem to strike the charitable donors as being at all strange that the poor family, though a few minutes before they had proclaimed themselves to be starving, did not at once rush off to the nearest baker's and buy some bread. No such thing! They went on singing away in most frightful discord, until the sudden appearance of a policeman, who was advancing in a manner which plainly showed that he knew the arch-impostors full well, spread the utmost dismay and bewilderment in their ranks.

The singing ceased in a moment, and the man hurriedly said, "Come along, Bet, or that bluebottle will precious soon blow the gaff," and they made a rush toward the next street, dragging the youngest children hastily along with them.

Such was the spectacle which the twins beheld, and it certainly afforded no encouraging picture of London life. It shocked the pure minds of that youthful pair to think that such impostures should be practised under the guise of honest poverty, for they knew that the consciousness that that these things were done must often prevent the really charitably disposed from dispensing the alms which they would otherwise bestow, and that therefore the really deserving suffered very frequently and severely for the rascality of practised deceivers.

Early in the forenoon of the following day, Christian and Christina were again in Redcross Street, at the door of the house to which their benevolent purpose brought them. The landlady made her appearance, and the tale which she told was as gratifying to the twins as it was almost completely unexpected. It appeared that a tall gentleman, with a dark complexion, and wearing a cloak, had called at the house in the company of a medical practitioner from the neighbourhood, about two hours after Christina left on the preceding day. The medical attendant ascended to see the invalid, while the gentleman remained below to question the landlady. What followed, had evidently been prearranged, and was speedily accomplished. A hackney-coach was fetched, the dying young woman was placed in it, and was borne away to another house, somewhere in the suburbs of Islington. The landlady mentioned the address, and concluded by observing that the tall, dark gentleman did not accompany Mary Wright to her new abode, but sent the surgeon with her, placing in his hand a handful of money ere he hurried away.

The twins had no difficulty in recognizing Mr. Redcliffe in the tall, dark gentleman, and they experienced the utmost delight at all the intelligence which they thus received. They repaired at once to the address named, and on arriving at the house, in an open, airy, and healthy part of Islington, they found that lodgings of the most cheerful and comfortable description had been taken for the poor sufferer, that a nurse had been provided for her, that ample funds had been placed for her benefit in the hands of the landlady, who was a kind, benevolent woman, and that poor Mary Wright herself had received Mr. Redcliffe's assurance, delivered through the medium of the worthy surgeon, that she need have no further care in respect to her maintenance, as she would be well provided for. Mary Wright had also learned that it was through Christina she had thus become the object of such noble charity, and we may add that she had not forgotten to inform the medical man of the kindness received from a beautiful young creature with dark hair and eyes, but whose name she had not learned.

CHAPTER XVII

INDORA

It was the eighth evening after that interview between Mr. Redcliffe and the Princess Indora which has been described in a recent chapter, and we must revisit the secluded abode of that Oriental lady. On this occasion we shall find her in the drawing-room, which was furnished with a mingled sumptuousness and elegance corresponding with the species of boudoir where we first beheld her. The draperies were of the costliest description; the sofas and ottomans were covered with a dark green velvet, of so rich a texture and with such a gloss, that it appeared almost a sin for a human form to press upon it. There were chairs in this room, made of some precious wood inlaid with mother-of-pearl, and having luxurious cushions of the same material as that which covered the ottomans. The ornaments upon the mantelpiece, the knickknacks upon the tables, the vases filled with flowers, or whence perfume exhaled their fragrance, were all of the costliest and most curious Eastern description, A mellowed lustre, but quite sufficient to flood the apartment, was thrown out by superb chandeliers; a fire burned cheerfully in the grate, and its blaze was shrouded from the eye by screens curiously painted, and the framework of which was elaborately as well as delicately carved. Fans, formed of the feathers of tropical birds, lay within the reach, wheresoever the princess might choose at the moment to seat herself, and a large cage, standing on a table near the window, contained within the sphere of its golden wires a dozen or so of birds of the most diminutive size, but in every variety of beautiful plumage.

The Princess Indora was reclining upon a sofa at about the same hour on which, eight days previously, we first introduced her to the reader. She was apparelled in a similarly fanciful style, only that she wore another dress, but the colours of the separate garments were chosen with a most tasteful regard to the delicate duskiness of the complexion and the nature of the charms they had to set off. Supremely beautiful — eminently handsome indeed — was the Princess Indora, as she reposed, in her Oriental garb, upon the velvet sofa in that sumptuously furnished room. And as before, too, there were intervals when she was deeply pensive, other intervals when she experienced a nervous excitement, for, as the reader is aware, it was on this evening that she was to receive the final decision of the object of her love.

Presently the door opened, and Sagoonah made her appearance. She entered, bearing the massive silver salver on which was the cut glass containing sherbet, and which she presented on bended knee to the princess. The Hindu woman was clad in the same style as that which we have before described, and which was so admirably calculated to set off the lithe bayadere symmetry of her shape, and to leave her form and limbs completely free for every movement and gesture.

" Within the hour that is passing, my faithful Sagoonah," said the princess, when she had quaffed a portion of the sherbet, " my fate will be sealed. The alternatives between which I am balancing are happiness and misery. Both are in extremes, and there is no medium in which I may take refuge. You, Sagoonah, who have been my confidante, you who have served me so faithfully, you who shrank not from accompanying me on my long, long journey to a strange clime, — you, I say, must feel some anxiety as to the result of this evening's interview ? "

" I do, lady," responded Sagoonah, and as she stood somewhat aside, her eyes suddenly flashed strange fires.

" You know, Sagoonah," continued the princess, " how fondly, how devotedly I have for years loved that man. You know how godlike was his beauty when first he became my father's prisoner — "

" I know it, princess," responded Sagoonah. " I was then a girl of about ten years of age."

" And I was fifteen," observed the princess, in a low, musing tone. "Yes, fifteen years have elapsed since the first day that I beheld Clement Redcliffe. He was the first Englishman that I had ever seen — "

"The first, too, your Highness, that I ever saw," interjected Sagoonah, and though her words were uttered with that profound respect which had become habitual to her, it was nevertheless with a slight air of abstraction that she thus spoke.

"Fifteen years — the most precious ones of my life," continued Indora, "have been passed in a love that has been all but hopeless. No, not hopeless, for if so, I could not have existed, but it is at least a love that has experienced no reciprocity. Yes, handsome as some being of a higher world was that Englishman when first we met. He tells me that he is changed now, and that the marks of age are coming thickly and rapidly upon him. If so, I behold them not, or scarcely. What to me is it if his form should change, when his mind still shines with the never dimming, imperishable light of one of these gems?" and her looks settled upon a bracelet studded with diamonds of the largest size and of the most dazzling brilliancy. "Methought," continued the princess, "that so long as he was a prisoner in my father's capital his proud soul would disdain to bend itself toward her who was the daughter of him who held him captive. Ay, and more than that, he learned by some means, I know not how, that when my father would have given him his liberty, it was in compliance with my secret promptings that he still retained him a prisoner. Yes, I did so prompt my father, for much as I loved Clement Redcliffe, deeply, deeply as I took his welfare to heart, I could not possibly bring myself to say the word which should make him free, and thus incur the risk of losing him for ever. He escaped. You are aware how; you know too how wild was my anguish, how bitter my grief, when I received the tidings of his flight. But then I thought to myself that perhaps now that he was free, he might no longer look upon me as one who was wronging him; he might forget the past, or at least pardon it, on account of all the love I bore him. I flattered myself, too, that this love so deep, so devoted, so imperishable, could scarcely fail to beget a kindred feeling. The eagle requires ample space for the play of his huge wings and the soaring of his ambitious flight, and so I thought that the proud soul of Clement Redcliffe, when enjoying the freedom of the whole world's range, might look upon me with a different regard from that with which it was wont to survey me in the narrow circuit of my father's capital. Sagoonah, think you that this hope will be disappointed?"

"Princess," responded the Hindu dependent, "I am but little accustomed to read the human heart, and the heart of an Englishman appears to me as inscrutable as the mysteries of some forbidden book."

"True! You cannot judge it," observed the princess, in a low, musing tone. "And moreover, you have never loved, Sagoonah. No, you have never loved; you know not what love is. You have been attached to me from your childhood, and if you had experienced the slightest scintillation of that passion which I feel, you would have told me, or I should have discovered it. Is it not so, Sagoonah?" and the princess raised her large, lustrous eyes, dark as those of the gazelle, toward the countenance of her dependent.

"It is so, lady," responded Sagoonah, in a low but firm voice.

"I marvel that you never loved," proceeded Indora, still in that same musing manner as before. "It appears to me that a heart susceptible of love must be invariably associated with beauty of the person; it seems as if beauty, being formed to create love, ought to prove susceptible of the fire which it kindles. And you, my faithful Sagoonah, possess charms superior to any of your sex or caste, in your own native land. Yes, you are handsome — very handsome," and now the eyes of the princess wandered slowly, and with a certain degree of listless abstraction, over the bayadere-like form of her attendant.

Sagoonah stood perfectly motionless, her figure upright as a dart, her head somewhat inclined forward, like a flower upon its stalk, and yet in that uprightness there was neither ungraceful stiffness nor inelegant rigidity. She seemed to feel that, as a slave, she was bound to submit with all becoming respect to that survey on the part of her mistress. Had an observer been present, he could not have avoided thinking to himself that they were two of the most splendid specimens of Oriental beauty, of distinct shades of complexion.

" And have you never thought to yourself, Sagoonah," asked the Princess Indora, " that you would like to know what love is? Have you never felt a craving to experience that sentiment which plays the chiefest part in all the affairs of this life? Has there been no curiosity in your soul to learn the joy, the delight, the happiness of love? "

The Hindu woman's cheek glowed as if with the purple flush of wine, — the rich red blood mantling through the transparency of her dusky skin, but the ruddy hue passed away as quickly as it rose up, and when the princess again slowly turned her eyes upon the countenance of Sagoonah, it had its wonted look and expression again.

" Yes, within the hour that is passing," said Indora, suddenly reverting to that topic which was most vitally interesting to herself, and without observing that her dependent had not answered the questions which she had put to her, " my fate must be sealed."

" And if the Englishman's decision be against your happiness, dear mistress of mine," said Sagoonah, now sinking on one knee and looking with affectionate earnestness up into Indora's countenance, " what will your Highness do? "

" Ah, what will I do? " she murmured, as an expression of anguish at the bare thought flitted over her superb features. " What will I do, Sagoonah? " Then after a pause, during which she seemed to reflect profoundly, she added, in accents of mingled mournfulness and despair, " Heaven only knows what I shall do! "

" But yet, dear lady, you have every hope, have you not? " inquired Sagoonah, as she still knelt by the velvet-covered ottoman, and still gazed earnestly up into the countenance of Indora. " Do you not imagine, beloved princess, that the sense of obligation is greater than that of wrong in the mind of the Englishman? If your royal father kept him captive for so many, many years, he at least treated him with all becoming hospitality; he lodged him in his own palace, he gave him slaves to minister unto him, a guard of honour to attend upon him, and riches to dispose of as he thought fit."

" Ay, but you understand not the proud soul of an Englishman," replied the Princess Indora; " you comprehend not that however brilliant the circumstances of his captivity, it is captivity all the same. The chains may be of gold, but they are still chains which he burns to throw off. Like the bird in his gilded cage, he is dazzled not by the sumptuousness of his dwelling, but pants for the fresh air of freedom, and so it was with Clement Redcliffe. He knew that the slaves were spies upon his actions, that the guards, though ostensibly appointed to do him honour, were nought else than gaolers and custodians, and that the riches heaped upon him were mere toys to render his captivity somewhat the less intolerable."

"And yet the Englishman bore himself courteously and well toward your royal father and your Highness's self," observed Sagoonah.

"It was with a cold courtesy," responded Indora, "and all that Clement Redcliffe did was doubtless for the purpose of conciliating my sire in the hope of obtaining his freedom all the more quickly. Besides, the natural pride of a civilized Englishman could not help feeling flattered by being placed in a position to smooth down the asperities of our own semibarbarism. Clement Redcliffe inculcated the arts of peace, and by his counsel enabled my father to amend those laws that were bad, and to promulgate new ones that were good, so as to forward the interests and promote the happiness of the people of Inderabad. But not one single suggestion in the art of war did Clement Redcliffe ever proffer; nor would he afford the slightest insight into the discipline of those English troops who have rendered themselves so formidable in our native clime. Do you comprehend wherefore he maintained so inexorable a reserve upon those points?"

"Doubtless, lady," answered Sagoonah, "he thought that the time might come when the English invaders would push their conquests to your royal parent's far-off kingdom, and therefore he would not put a weapon, even the smallest and the bluntest, in the hands of your august father's troops, for fear lest it should be used sooner or later against the armies of his own fellow countrymen."

"Yes, these were his motives," rejoined the princess, "and they rendered him all the more admirable, all the more noble, in my estimation. But I was ere now explaining how it was that Clement Redcliffe, while enduring his captivity, took a pride in propagating the arts of peace amongst us. Yet month after month and year after year did he demand his freedom, and at length my father would have given it, but I, alas — "

The princess stopped short, and Sagoonah, slowly rising from her kneeling position, retreated to a respectful distance, where she stood in her wonted attitude, her bayadere form upright, and her face inclining toward the splendidly modelled bust which the arrangements of her linen dress left more than half-revealed.

" 'Twas strange," proceeded Indora, after a brief pause, and again speaking in a musing manner, " that my interference should have come to Clement Redcliffe's knowledge, for my father would scarcely have spoken of it. Doubtless it was a surmise, though a correct one, on Redcliffe's part, but how bitter were the reproaches which he levelled against me at the time. Ah, that was a scene of fearful excitement which I can never forget."

" Your Highness has suffered much for your love's sake," observed Sagoonah, gently.

" Love is a rose with thorns," answered Indora, in a mournful voice, " and perhaps, my faithful Sagoonah, it is fortunate for you that you have never experienced that sentiment. To me it has proved a source of illimitable happiness and of almost overwhelming affliction, — the soul alternating between a paradise of bliss and Satan's kingdom. No, Sagoonah, seek not to learn what love is; avoid it if you have the power. Happier, far happier are you than your unfortunate mistress."

" Is hope, then, at this instant dead within the bosom of your Highness? " inquired the Hindu dependent.

" Oh, how can I explain the exact nature of my own feelings? " cried Indora, almost petulantly. " When the ocean is agitated into mighty waves, the bark which is floating over it rises at one moment to the summit of a billow, and is the next plunged down into the abyss. So it is with my heart, — now at one instant elevated by hope, at another plunged into despair. For the vessel, when thus storm-tossed, beholds from the summit of the billows the beacon-light shining afar off and marking the entrance of the refuge harbour, but when borne down into the deep, deep trough of the sea, the mariner on board his vessel beholds nought save the dark, gloomy, menacing waters around him. And so, again, is it with my heart. Now, Sagoonah, you comprehend all the mingled pleasures and pains, the ecstatic hopes and the intervals of blank despair, the thrilling joy and the deep despondency, the fervid expectations and the wildering apprehensions, which make up the sum of love. Seek not to know it, my faithful Sagoonah. Seek not to know it. It is your fond mistress who counsels you thus."

Having thus spoken, Indora made a hasty and somewhat impatient sign, and Sagoonah glided forth from the sumptuously furnished apartment.

Scarcely had the Hindu woman reached the foot of the staircase, when a knock and ring called her to the front door and on opening it, Mr. Redcliffe stepped across the threshold. He was, as usual, enveloped in his ample cloak, and his hat was drawn over his countenance, not as if, while coming hither, he had more than at any other time studied to avoid observation, but such appeared to be his invariable habit when moving about the streets of the mighty metropolis. As he placed his hat upon the hall-table, and put off his cloak, he flung a look upon Sagoonah, for the impression of her haunting eyes was still strong upon his mind, and he doubtless now regarded her to see whether she again looked at him in that same strange fashion which had sent a vague and unknown trouble into the depths of his soul. But it was not so. The Hindu woman, having closed the front door, stood in readiness to conduct Mr. Redcliffe into the presence of her mistress; her demeanour was that of an Oriental slave,—her looks cast down, and the brilliant lustre of her eyes veiled by the thick jetty fringes which formed such dark lines, so that the very duskiness of her complexion appeared pale and light in comparison therewith.

Another minute, and Mr. Redcliffe again stood before the Indian princess.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE DECISION

It would be impossible to describe the feelings with which Indora became aware that this man who was the arbiter of her destiny was now once more in her presence. She rose to a sitting posture on the velvet-covered sofa, but she dared not throw a single glance toward him. Hope and despair were strangely agitating in her heart, — blending, too, although in confliction, paradoxical as the expression may seem. It was natural that she should seek to prolong this hope as much as possible, and that, on the other hand, she should not rush forward as it were to find herself face to face with despair, until imperiously compelled to envisage it. The colour went and came in rapid transitions upon her cheeks, blushing and disappearing through the transparency of her delicately dusky skin, while her bosom rose and sank with quick heavings.

"My promise is kept," said Clement Redcliffe, speaking in his wonted accents of mournfulness, but in all the harmony of his rich, manly voice, "and your Highness will now probably explain wherefore you demanded this interval of eight days' delay?"

Indora motioned Redcliffe to take a seat by her side, and now her eyes were turned slowly upon him. Hope and fear trembled in that glance; love and apprehension vibrated in that look. She dreaded what his decision might be, and yet she sought to put away from her own mind the contemplation of the very worst. The Englishman placed himself on the ottoman at a distance which was properly respectful toward a lady of her princely rank, but which was little calculated to encourage the hope that her loving heart sustained in conflict with the strength of despair.

"Yes, I will explain myself," said Indora, with a sudden sensation of delight that she was thus furnished by his very words with an opportunity of again appealing to the tenderest feelings of his nature. "I besought this brief delay in the conviction that during the interval you would not fail to ponder well and profoundly upon the decision toward the proclamation of which each passing day brought you nearer and nearer. Then I thought to myself that every proof of my devoted love, every evidence of my imperishable affection, would present itself to your memory, and that the whole, accumulating with force and power, would rule your mind in my favour. I thought to myself that you would recollect how the mightiest princes of my own native clime sought my hand in marriage, but that I rejected every proposal for your sake. I thought, too, that you would bear in mind how by those refusals I drew down upon myself my father's anger — "

"Your Highness had little to fear from the king's indignation," interrupted Redcliffe, "for your influence over him was complete."

"The allusion is ungenerous," observed Indora, softly, and half-reproachfully. "It is meant to remind me that I stood as a barrier in the way of your freedom, and that I overruled my father's favourable inclinations, when toward the end of your captivity he was about to yield to your often-repeated prayer to be liberated from it. Yes, it was a crime, — a dark, branding crime which I thus affixed upon myself — But, oh, I felt that it was death to part from you, and I had not the courage — deeply, devotedly as I loved you — to lay such suicidal hands upon myself."

"Oh, if you had given me my liberty," exclaimed Redcliffe, "I should have fallen at your feet and worshipped you as an angel. This is the hour for the fullest explanations, and I came prepared to give them. Think you, Indora, that when first becoming a captive in your father's sovereign city, I yielded to his request to instruct your then youthful mind, for you were but fifteen years of age, — think you, I ask, that I accepted the duties of a preceptor from any love which I bore toward your father, who had deprived me of my freedom? Know you not that the king's action was one which we Europeans regard as the basest and the vilest? I went to the Court of Inderabad as an accredited emissary from the Anglo-Indian Government, and regardless of the laws of nations, your father held me captive. Reports were spread that I had perished, along with my suite, in one of your Indian jungles, and thus the authorities at Calcutta adopted no measures to procure my liberation. I found myself thrown entirely on my own resources, and methought that if I sedulously devoted myself to whatsoever tasks the king your father should prescribe unto me, and if they were honourable ones, he would be all the more speedily moved to compassion, and would give me my freedom. And then, too, I thought that if I aided in the expansion of your natural intelligence, if I taught you our European accomplishments, and by such inculcations as I was enabled to impart rendered you the most brilliant princess of all the northern and independent region of the great peninsula of Hindustan, you would experience a gratitude which would raise me up a friend to intercede with that king who held me in captivity. And perhaps, too, I was flattered somewhat — for I was much younger then — by finding myself placed in a position and furnished with an opportunity to carry European civilization into the midst of the Oriental barbarism of your father's kingdom, and therefore did I address myself readily, and even cheerfully, to the tasks that were allotted to me. But that gratitude, Indora, which I expected at your hands, I received it not."

" No, not gratitude," replied the Indian princess, suddenly starting with the enthusiasm of her feelings; " it was nought so cold as mere gratitude that I gave you, — it was my love."

" Ah, but that love was so far fatal to me," rejoined Redcliffe, " that it prolonged my captivity. Do you recollect, Indora, that on one occasion I even humbled myself at your very feet to implore my release from your father's capital? "

" I remember it, alas! but too well," responded the Eastern lady. " It was when an English traveller was found dead, slain by robbers in a wood near the city, and when the papers and documents he had about him were brought to the palace — "

" Yes," cried Redcliffe, with exceeding bitterness, and as a strange look that was akin to rage swept over his countenance, " for amongst those papers there was an English journal which contained something that regarded myself. Yes, Indora, it was after reading that journal that I threw myself at your feet, and besought you to give that consent which your royal father had already vouchsafed, but which you had refused to second."

"I know it but too well," answered the princess, who had shrunk back in mournful dismay from the strange look which Redcliffe's countenance had transiently expressed, "and I repeat, it was a crime on my part, — a foul treachery, whereof I have since deeply and sincerely repented. But why all these reiterations? Why taunt me thus with what I have done? Heaven knows — and I speak of that heaven into the holy mysteries of which you yourself initiated me by the inculcation of the Christian creed, — Heaven knows, I say, that I erred through love, that I was guilty through my mad fondness for you. Oh, use not my conduct of that time as a pretext and as an excuse for proclaiming a decision which is to consign me to despair. There is no other misdeed with which you can reproach me, Clement Redcliffe. I was in my girlhood when first you knew me, for long years had you your eye ever upon me, and you know whether my life has been stainless and immaculate or not?"

"Indora," answered Redcliffe, now evidently much moved, "not for a single instant can I hesitate to do justice to your numerous virtues. I admitted, when we were together eight days back, that I had received much good as well as much evil at the hands of your father and yourself. The riches which I possess were conferred upon me by your sire, but I felt that I had earned them, or else not a single one of the priceless gems and the costly gifts which had been showered upon me should I have borne away with me when I at length succeeded in effecting my escape. Nevertheless, though I earned all that wealth by long years of devoted application to the tasks prescribed me by your father, I am not the less grateful to the source whence those riches emanated. All this I do not deny; on the contrary, I wish you to understand the precise feelings of my heart, for this is an occasion of no ordinary importance, inasmuch as I see, alas! that the happiness of a fellow creature is deeply involved."

"You pity me?" said Indora, and hope flashed in her fine dark eyes.

" Yes, I pity you," responded Redcliffe, " if neither as a woman nor a princess you consider the avowal to be an insult. But I was about to declare that had you, Indora, behaved more generously toward me, had you frankly, and with that nobleness of heart for which I once gave you credit, consented to my freedom when your royal father had agreed thereto, it might have been — yes, it might have been — different now. I should have retained such a deep impression of gratitude toward you that whatsoever sacrifice of my own feelings it might have cost to ensure your happiness, the word — the affirmative syllable — might possibly have gone forth from my lips. Ah, Indora, think you that I can forget how I flung myself at your feet on the same day that I read in the English journal — it was two years ago — that which so nearly concerned myself? Think you that I can forget how I besought and entreated and wept, and all so vainly? And in the wildness of the language to which I gave vent, I even said enough to give you at least some faint insight into those reasons so urgent, so vitally important to myself, which had suddenly transpired to render me more than ever anxious to retain my liberty. And yet you refused."

" Clement," responded Indora, the tears now gushing forth from her eyes, streaming down her cheeks, and trickling upon the bosom which palpitated as if it would burst, " you yourself were a witness of the almost mortal anguish which it cost me to pronounce that refusal. I bade you abandon all thoughts of returning to a land which, from the few words you let drop, I saw but too well you had no reason to love. I offered you my hand. I, a great princess, humbled myself far more to you than you, with all your pride of an Englishman, could possibly humble yourself to me. I gave you the assurance that my father would consent to our union, that you yourself might become a prince, that at his death the diadem of Inderabad should descend upon your brows, and that you should sit upon a throne. But more than all this I offered you. I offered you the fondest, most devoted love which woman's heart could entertain for man, and think you therefore, Clement Redcliffe, that when you refused all these proffers, I had no woman's pride that was wounded, and that perhaps for a moment there was some transient shade of vindictiveness strangely commingling with the very love that I bore you? Reflect upon all this. You yourself have taught me how weak and feeble is human nature, how poor the human heart. Can you not therefore make allowances for all that I felt and for all that I did on the occasion of which you have spoken? Besides, you should not judge me according to the severe rules by which you would estimate the conduct of a woman of your own native clime. No, no; it were too cruel. I am too much to be pitied — and you are too just."

"You possess, Indora, too fine an intelligence, and feelings too delicately susceptible," answered Redcliffe, "to think that this last reason which you have urged is the best and most forceful of any which you have as yet advanced. Remember that you are not altogether of Hindu extraction. Your father is a native prince, but your mother was a Georgian, and hence the comparative fairness of your complexion. But we must not argue longer on the subject. You now understand me, Indora, much better perhaps than ever you did before, and I on the other hand am willing to believe that you yourself regret that portion of your conduct which must be but too well calculated to inspire such remorseful feeling. Therefore I appeal to your generosity, I appeal to that feminine delicacy which characterizes you, I appeal to all those good and virtuous principles which have rendered your life so stainless, — by all these I appeal that you will accept my decision as a final one, and this decision is, that we part now to meet no more."

The Princess Indora pressed her hand to her brow, and a faint, half-stifled shriek burst from her lips. The next moment, in a paroxysm of indescribable agony, she threw herself upon her knees, and extending her clasped hands toward Redcliffe, cried, in a frantic voice, "You are killing me! You are killing me!"

"For Heaven's sake give not thus way to your feelings!" and he hastened to raise her up.

It seemed as if she were about to faint; she clung to him, and her head drooped upon his breast. He was forced to sustain her, but he gently placed her upon the ottoman, and standing before her, he said, "Indora, if you ever loved me, I beseech you to fulfil your promise and respect my decision!"

She had for a moment covered her countenance with her hands, and her entire form was shaken with a low, convulsive sob. Slowly now she removed those hands, and looking up toward the Englishman with such ineffable woe depicted upon her features that it made his very heart bleed to contemplate the spectacle, she said, in the profound voice of despair, "Yes, I will respect your decision."

Clement Redcliffe was about to extend his hand and bid the princess a last farewell, when a thought struck him, and he lingered, but still he knew not how to shape the request which he had to make, for a request it was.

"Indora," at length he said, "I will not ask if it is with a feeling of anger you are about to behold me go forth from your presence, because I know that from all you have been saying, you are no longer capable of experiencing the slightest vindictiveness toward me."

"No, Clement Redcliffe," she answered, solemnly, but at the same time with a visible effort keeping back an ebullition of the strongest feelings; "rather than do you an injury, I would lay down my life to serve you."

The Englishman was profoundly touched by this assurance. The reader has seen enough of him to be aware that he was naturally generous-hearted, — indeed of a fine, chivalrous character, notwithstanding that so large a portion of his life had been spent in captivity, and that this circumstance, as well as others, had tended to sour his mind and warp some of his better feelings. Yes, he was generous-hearted, and the assurance which the unfortunate princess had just given could not fail to touch him profoundly. Besides, he would have been something less or something more than man if he had remained altogether inaccessible to the impression which that fond woman's devoted love was so well calculated to make, — even though it were a love which he himself could not reciprocate. It therefore cut him to the very soul, it made his heart bleed, it awakened sensibilities which he had fancied crushed, or at least buried in eternal slumber. It staggered the very resolve which had ere now gone forth from his lips.

He resumed his seat on the sofa, perhaps a little nearer to the princess than he was placed during all the former part of the interview, and she followed him with her eyes, in which some faint gleam of hope glittered again, but yet so feebly, because she dared not allow herself to entertain it.

"Indora," suddenly exclaimed Redcliffe, with almost passionate vehemence, and such a paroxysm of feeling was indeed most rare on his part, "it is impossible I can leave you thus. I regret having said anything that might seem to savour of reproach; I am sorry that I should have dwelt so long and so emphatically on your conduct in prolonging my captivity in India. But heavens! if you were aware of all the mischief which was thus entailed upon me, and you can in part comprehend it, from those words which I let drop on the memorable occasion when I knelt at your feet by the side of the marble fountain in the palace of Inderabad, oh, if you knew all you would pardon any bitterness that tinctured my words!"

"It would be impossible, Clement," answered the princess, mildly, almost meekly, "for you to give me offence. My unfortunate love has tamed my disposition; I no longer think and feel with the pride of a king's daughter, but with the humility and the suffering of a poor weak woman!"

"Heavens!" ejaculated Redcliffe, visibly struggling with himself as the resolve which he had pronounced was more and more staggered by each successive proof of Indora's illimitable devotion, "how can I endure to torture you, while you display so much goodness?"

He rose and paced the apartment with hurried and uneven steps. That man whose wont it was to be so mournfully grave and so coldly reserved — so shut up, as it were, in the secret sorrows of his own inscrutable heart — was now a prey to the profoundest agitation. Indora followed him with her eyes; that very agitation afflicted her on the one hand, while it partially seemed to encourage hope on the other, and the tears again streamed down her cheeks, again trickled upon the gorgeous bust which the open caftan and the low under-garment left half-revealed.

"Indora," said Redcliffe, abruptly resuming his seat by her side, "I cannot leave you thus; my very nature revolts against it. And yet for Heaven's sake buoy not up yourself with immediate hope, for that could not possibly be fulfilled at once. No, sternly and implacably should I refuse, even though you were at this moment at the point of death and an affirmative syllable from my lips could alone save you. But yet —"

He stopped short, and it was with breathless suspense, with fixed eyes, dilated nostrils, lips apart, head bent forward, and bosom upheaved, that Indora sat in the attitude of one who awaits a sound which she expects to hear but which she is afraid may escape her.

"Princess," continued Redcliffe, "allusion has been made more than once during our interview to those few words which I let drop from my lips when I knelt at your feet by the side of the marble fountain. To what precise extent the revelation contained in those words might have reached, I have no accurate remembrance; my thoughts were full of wildness at the time, my brain was distracted; the scene itself, when looked back upon, appears to be enveloped in a sort of misty dreaminess. However, that I did make some avowal, that I did let fall something in that unguarded moment, I recollect full well. I have now a request to make — "

"You need not give utterance to it," responded the princess; "I can read your thoughts. You desire that the seal of secrecy shall remain upon my lips. Good heavens, Clement! do you think that I would betray a syllable that was calculated to do you an injury?"

"And after that assurance," exclaimed Redcliffe, "I dare not — I must not prove altogether ungrateful. Listen to me, Indora. You comprehend sufficient from those words which I let fall — and the necessity of keeping which inviolably secret you seem fully to understand — that my presence in England is connected with a matter of vital importance to myself. Yes, I have a specific object to accomplish, and to that must all my thoughts and all my energies be devoted. It may be achieved quickly, or it may take years to be worked out, — Heaven alone can tell. But that same Heaven can by its own inscrutable ways further my objects and conduct them to a speedy and a successful issue. Until that issue be accomplished, I am not master of my own actions — I am not even able to dispose of myself. But this is what I have to say, Indora, that if when my purpose is achieved, and if circumstances should leave me a free agent, then will I be mindful of this devoted love of yours, and then you shall not vainly implore at my feet."

"Oh, is this possible?" exclaimed the delighted princess, and sinking upon her knees, she took Redcliffe's hand, pressing it in fervour to her lips.

"Rise, Indora, rise. This suppliant posture must not be assumed to me."

"But you have given me hope — I am no longer miserable. I am happy, — oh, I am joyously happy!" and she sprang up to her feet, her magnificent countenance radiant with the altered feelings that were thus suddenly excited in her soul.

"Cherish that hope if you will, Indora," said the Englishman; "cherish it if it will make you happy, and I swear to you that if circumstances permit, it shall be fulfilled. But until that time, think not to behold me again."

"Oh, I can endure separation so long as there is hope," exclaimed the princess, in a tone of gushing enthusiasm. "I have waited so long to receive from your lips a single syllable of hope that I can wait longer yet for that hope's realization. But tell me, — you say when the time shall come — are you confident that it will come sooner or later?"

"Yes, it will come," answered Redcliffe; "it will come, rest assured, or there would be no justice in heaven itself."

With these words he abruptly quitted the room, and Indora, sinking upon the ottoman, almost overcome with the joyousness of her feelings, murmured to herself, "There is hope. There is hope."

Notwithstanding the violent agitation which Clement Redcliffe had experienced toward the close of this interview, the instant the door of the drawing-room shut behind him, he regained his habitual air of mournful gravity, so that it would have been impossible for any observer to gather from his looks a single scintillation of what had been passing. He descended the staircase, and found Sagoonah waiting in the hall to afford him egress. He put on his cloak, took up his hat, and was turning toward the door with an abruptness of movement which he often unconsciously displayed, when again he caught the eyes of the Hindu woman fixed upon him with the strange burning brightness of their regards. He stopped short instinctively; those eyes were instantaneously veiled by their long jetty fringes, the intenseness of the spell which had for a moment riveted him was thus as suddenly withdrawn, and in silence he hurried forth from Shrubbery Villa. But as he sped along the by-lane leading to the main road, he again felt as if he were under the incomprehensible spell-like influence of Sagoonah's haunting eyes.

The Hindu woman, having closed the front door behind Mr. Redcliffe, ascended the stairs, and glided into the drawing-room with her wonted noiseless step. Sinking upon her knees at the feet of the princess, she looked up into her countenance, and at once read there an answer to the question which, as a slave, she scarcely dared ask. For an instant Sagoonah's eyes flashed brightly, and then they were cast down again.

" I understand you, my faithful dependent," said Indora, passing her beautifully modelled hand caressingly over the Hindu woman's jet black hair, so smoothly brushed. " The kind interest you feel in me renders you impatient to know the result. You have partially read it on my features, and your eyes glistened with a sensation of joy. Yes, Sagoonah, I am no longer in a state of uncertainty, — I am permitted to hope."

The Hindu woman took the princess's hand, and raised it to her lips. At the same time Indora felt a burning teardrop fall upon that hand, and again caressing the dependent, she said, in a kind, soothing voice, " You weep for joy, my faithful Sagoonah, you weep for joy; and I love you for this fresh evidence of your devoted affection."

Sagoonah kissed her mistress's hand once more, and slowly rising from her kneeling posture, she retreated to a little distance, her tall, symmetrical shape drawn up as usual, so that it displayed the beautiful bend of the back, the straightness of all the limbs, and the sculptural modelling of all the contours. Her countenance was inclined (as was its wont when she was in that position) toward her bosom, and she remained motionless as a statue.

" Sagoonah," said the princess, after a long pause, during which she reflected profoundly, " tell Mark to come to me at once."

The dependent quitted the room, and in a few minutes a man servant made his appearance. He was dressed in plain clothes, — a neat suit of black, with a white cravat. He was of the middle age, quiet and sedate-looking, but with a certain honesty and frankness of countenance which would at once have prepossessed a beholder in his favour. He bowed low to Indora, and stood in silence to await her commands. We should observe that although he knew full well that she was of princely rank, yet he addressed her not, when speaking, with the highest title properly belonging thereto, but with an inferior one, for in order to avoid unpleasant observation and gossiping curiosity, Indora passed not as a princess in England, but merely as a wealthy lady of Hindustan. Two female dependents (Sagoonah and another) together with a native male servant, had accompanied her from Inderabad. The Englishman, whose Christian name was Mark, had been hired by her at Calcutta to serve as her intendant, steward, and butler, — the comptroller, in short, of her little household. He therefore knew who she was, but Sagoonah alone of those who had accompanied her from India was acquainted with the real object of her Highness's visit to England. It was Mark who on the arrival in London had procured the villa for the princess's accommodation, and in all respects he had proved himself efficient and trustworthy. While we are speaking of the household, we may as well add that besides the domestics already mentioned, there was a groom and coachman, for the princess had at once bought a carriage and a pair of horses on settling at the villa. The coachman did not sleep in the house; the groom occupied an apartment over the stables, and these two last-named dependents were in total ignorance of the high rank of their mistress.

We may now continue the thread of our narrative, taking it up at the point where Mark had entered the drawing-room in pursuance of the summons sent by the princess through Sagoonah.

"Is it possible, Mark," inquired Indora, "to obtain any English newspapers that go back for several years?"

"All English newspapers, please your ladyship," was the domestic's response, "are filed at certain places in London, and it is even possible sometimes to purchase a complete set of any particular newspaper."

"In that case," resumed Indora, with satisfaction upon her countenance, "I must get you, the very first thing to-morrow, to procure me a file for the last twenty years. Do you think you can accomplish it? Spare not gold —"

"Everything, please your ladyship, can be procured in this country by means of money. By noon to-morrow I pledge myself that your ladyship shall be in possession of a file of newspapers."

The domestic then bowed and withdrew.

CHAPTER XIX

STRUGGLES

Two months had elapsed since the occurrences which we have been relating, and it now verged toward the close of December. During these two months poor Mary Wright had breathed her last, and was consigned to the grave. Almost daily did Christina visit the perishing creature, and for hours would she at times remain with her, assisting the nurse and the landlady of the house in their kind assiduities toward smoothing the progress of the victim to another world. Mr. Redcliffe called occasionally to inquire at the front door how the invalid was, but he never sought her presence; he did not choose to be thanked for all that he was doing for her. His purse, however, afforded ample proof of the generous sympathy which he experienced on her behalf, for she was not merely surrounded with comforts, but even with luxuries. Her benefactor's conduct in thus avoiding her presence may appear eccentric, but on the other hand, it was full of kindness and consideration. Frequently would the most delicious and expensive fruits be delivered at the house, — fruits that must have cost gold in Covent Garden Market, and there was no difficulty in conjecturing from whom they came. When she breathed her last, Mr. Redcliffe gave instructions that her remains were to be decently interred, and he liberally rewarded the nurse, the landlady, and the medical attendant.

He would have rewarded Christina likewise, only he knew not that she stood in need of succour, and he would have been afraid of insulting her by offering her any testimonial of his appreciation of her goodness toward the perished one. Well aware was he of this goodness; he had not merely learned in the first instance how Christina had behaved when she visited Mary Wright in Redcross Street, but he had also been informed by the landlady of the house at Islington, of Miss Ashton's frequent visits there. But it so happened that whenever Mr. Redcliffe called, Christina never came up to the door at the same time; so that since that encounter in Redcross Street, Mr. Redcliffe and the twins had not once met. Christian was in the habit of seeing his sister as far as the house, it being at no very great distance from their own lodging at Camden Town, and then he would set off in search of a situation, returning at an hour previously appointed, to fetch his sister and conduct her home again.

But during these two months Christian had found no situation and Christina no work. They had both used every endeavour to procure such employment as was respectively fitted for each, and they had failed. There seemed at this period of the orphans' lives to be a kind of fatality which influenced them with its evil spell. We need not enter into particulars in respect to the numerous applications made by each in countless quarters, nor the nature of the refusals — sometimes rebuffs — which they had to encounter. They had called upon Mrs. Macaulay, but she was unable to give them any recommendations to particular quarters, and, as the reader is aware, they were in all other respects friendless — those two poor orphans — in the great metropolis. Mrs Macaulay, having perceived several instances of Mr. Redcliffe's charitable disposition, had thought of mentioning to him the gloomy prospects of the twins, but somehow or another she always forgot to do so when she had an opportunity. These opportunities were indeed rare enough, for Mr. Redcliffe, soon discovering that she was of a gossiping character, invariably cut her short whenever she seemed to threaten him with a long discourse.

Never in the presence of Mary Wright, while she yet remained alive, did Christina drop the slightest allusion to her own position, though it had daily been becoming worse and worse, and many and many an hour did she give to the dying young woman, when, but for her, she would have been roaming about from place to place, wherever there appeared a chance of procuring needlework.

Before continuing the narrative, we must remark, in addition to the above explanations, that during the time which had elapsed since the orphans quitted Mrs. Macaulay's house, they had seen nothing more of Lord Octavian Meredith.

They had requested that Mrs. Macaulay would not mention their new abode to that Mr. Percival who had once called, if he should happen to call again. The twins had their own little pride as well as other people, and they did not choose to be visited in their more humble lodging by one who was evidently moving in the best sphere of society. Besides, Christina herself had felt that for other reasons, which her feminine delicacy naturally suggested, it would be better that such an acquaintance should be discontinued. Not, be it understood, that she knew or even suspected that under the name of Mr. Percival an aristocratic title was disguised, but a becoming sense of propriety made her comprehend that situated as she was, with no other protector than a brother of her own age, — a mere youth, — it were imprudent to receive the visits of a fashionable young gentleman of whom she knew comparatively nothing.

The reader will recollect that we glanced hurriedly at the resources possessed by the orphans when they left Mrs. Macaulay's; we stated that in addition to a good stock of clothes, they had some fourteen or fifteen pounds in money, besides a few articles of jewelry of some value. The outlay on Mary Wright's part had made a certain inroad upon the pecuniary portion of those resources; their lodgings were ten shillings a week, — they had now occupied them exactly nine weeks, — and therefore it is easy to calculate that by this time their money was exhausted. They had lived with all possible frugality, allowing themselves mere necessaries; and as day by day went by, beholding the gradual decrease of their money-stock, until the very last sixpence was expended, — those same successive days bringing no brightening prospect in respect to the chances of obtaining employment, — the poor orphans naturally grew more and more dispirited.

And now at length the day came when they had no money left. What was to be done? To seek assistance of Mrs. Macaulay was out of the question. They did not altogether understand her mercenary disposition; they did not precisely expect a refusal, if they did address themselves to her, but they felt that they had no right to do so, that they had no claim upon her, and that even if they had, they saw no chance of fixing a date for the refunding of any loan which she might advance. The orphans deliberated mournfully and tearfully. They embraced each other, they endeavoured to impart mutual consolation; but it was all in vain, for they had none to offer. Yet something must be done. Christina's mind was made up; she could suffer privations herself, but she could not endure the idea that her beloved brother should want bread. He himself was racked by the same thought on her behalf, and he was about to propose that he should go and do that which Christina herself had resolved upon doing. It was in the afternoon of a chill December day when this deliberation took place, and Christina, on a certain pretext, got her brother to go off to some distance. She spoke of a place where he had called a few days back to ask for employment as a clerk; he had received no decisive answer, though the evasive one was almost tantamount to a refusal, and his sister now suggested that he should go and apply once more. She knew, or at least she feared, that the walk would be an unavailing one, and it cut her to the quick to think that her poor brother's feelings were again to be wounded by a rebuff. But still she preferred that he should even endure this than have to experience that still deeper humiliation which in the love she bore him she now purposed to take upon herself.

Christian set out, and when he was gone, Christina unlocked her work-box, lifted out the upper part, and drew forth a small packet tied around with tape. She unfastened the tape, she opened the packet, and tears trickled down her lovely pale cheeks, as she contemplated the articles therein contained. One was a long tress of raven hair, — a tress that must have constituted part of a luxuriant mass which might have formed the glory of a queen, ay, or the envy of one. This tress the poor girl placed to her lips, and kissed it reverently, devoutly, and, oh, how sadly, while the tears trickled faster and faster down her cheeks.

"Oh, my mother!" she murmured to herself; "you whom I never knew, you who were snatched away from us long ere we had intelligence to appreciate your loss, you who must be a saint in heaven, look down and compassionate your poor orphans who have already commenced their hard struggle with the world."

Christina's bosom was convulsed with sobs, as she thus mentally apostrophized the authoress of her being, and through the tears that dimmed her eyes, she gazed steadfastly upon that long dark tress which she held in her hand. It was one which seemed as if it might have belonged to her own head, of such raven darkness was it, and of such silky fineness. She replaced it in her work-box, carefully enveloped however in a piece of tissue-paper, and then she drew forth a watch from the packet which she had opened. It was a beautiful gold watch, of delicate fashion and exquisite workmanship, and fitted for a lady. Many, many pounds might have been raised upon it, — at least many, many pounds in the estimation of those who were penniless, and Christina was already calculating that the produce of this watch would enable her brother and herself to subsist for many, many weeks, when a compunctious thought smote her, and she laid it down. Then she took up two rings, and these also she contemplated with a deep and mournful interest. One was a wedding-ring, the other, likewise a lady's, of no considerable value but of exquisite workmanship. Again did the compunctious feeling strike the sensitive girl, and as the tears now rained down her cheeks, she murmured, " No, mother! we will starve; we will perish, sooner than part with these memorials which we possess of you."

The watch and the two rings were replaced in the packet, which was folded up and carefully tied, and the work-box was locked again. Then Christina went to her own trunk, and selecting her best dress and shawl, she enveloped them in a handkerchief and issued forth from the lodging-house. The poor girl bent her way to the nearest pawnbroker's shop. It was now completely dusk. The gas was lighted inside; the plate and jewelry in the window shone with resplendence. Christina lingered for a few moments at the shop-door, but she had not the courage to enter, and she passed along the street. Again did the tears stream from her eyes at the thought of the distressing position to which her brother and herself were reduced. Then she recollected that he would return presently, fatigued with his walk, hungry, too, as he had gone forth, and that there was not a morsel of bread at the lodging for him to eat. She abruptly turned back, wiped the tears from her eyes, and mustering up all her courage, sped in the direction of the pawnbroker's shop. A loutish-looking boy was gazing in at the window, devouring all the fine things with his eyes, but as Miss

Ashton approached the door, he suddenly looked around, and with a coarse grin said, "Ah, young o'oman! it's easier to take things there than to git 'em out agin."

It was not that the fellow ill-naturedly intended to wound the poor girl's feelings, but his words had that effect, piercing indeed like a barbed arrow into her heart, for she was in that desponding, almost wretched state of mind, when any incident of this sort suddenly assumes the aspect of an ominous prediction to be fearfully fulfilled. With almost a preterhuman effort she kept back the tears that were again ready to start forth from her beauteous black eyes, and in a fit of desperation she rushed into the shop.

The pawnbroker, with spectacles upon his nose and pen stuck behind his ear, bent a scrutinizing glance upon the young girl, so as to assure himself, as far as such survey would, that she had not stolen the articles she came to pledge, and then he examined them. She was ready to sink with shame during the process, and all the more so, as in the middle of it a couple of ill-looking half-tipsy women came in, with brazen effrontery in their looks, for they were not humiliated at the thought of being seen in such a place. The pawnbroker asked her how much she required upon the articles, but she was so confused that she was unable to utter a word. The man's experience in such matters at once enabled him to detect the difference between shrinking bashfulness and conscious dishonesty; he therefore received the pledges, handed her over thirty shillings, together with a small ticket, and Christina hurried out of the shop, infinitely relieved at escaping from the coarse looks and jeering whispers of the two women.

She purchased provisions, and reëntered the lodging. When her brother returned from his unavailing errand, his eyes instantaneously glanced from the food which was spread upon the table, toward his sister, and he burst into tears. He comprehended in a moment the generosity of her purpose in sending him temporarily out of the way, and he embraced her fervently. But then a painful idea smote him, and through his tears he again glanced — but now with anxious inquiry — toward Christina. She comprehended what he meant, and at once reassured him by explaining what she had done, and that the little memorials which they possessed of their long dead mother had not been touched. They sat down to eat, but it was with no small degree of bitterness that they partook of the food obtained by money raised from such a source.

Christian rose very early on the following morning, and told his sister that he should renew his inquiries after a place, notwithstanding the disappointments he had already experienced. She replied that she also should go about to solicit work, and begged her brother to return in a few hours to escort her for the purpose. He promised that he would, and he sallied forth. Repairing to a neighbouring coffee-house, he carefully inspected the advertising columns of the newspapers, and his eyes settled upon an announcement to the effect that a young man of intelligence, and who wrote a gentlemanly hand, was required by a nobleman as an amanuensis, or private secretary. Application was to be made at a particular address in Piccadilly. Off set Christian in that direction; we cannot exactly say with hope in his heart, because he had already experienced so many disappointments and rebuffs, but at least he was determined not to lose the opportunity for want of following it up. On arriving in Piccadilly and reaching the particular address indicated, he found that it was a jeweller's shop. He thought there must be some mistake, but as the number of the house was precisely that specified in the newspaper advertisement, he resolved to inquire. Entering the shop, he addressed himself to one of the serving-men, and on naming his business, was at once informed that it was the proper place at which to apply in the first instance. Then the shopman gave Christian a card, and recommended him to go at once, as there had already been several applicants for the situation.

The youth felt that the advice given was somewhat cheering, inasmuch as it appeared to promise that he would not be considered too young for the employment which he sought. He looked at the card, and found that it was that of the Duke of Marchmont, whose residence was in Belgrave Square. Christian had never, to his knowledge, heard the name mentioned before, and he was stricken with timidity at the thought of appearing as a candidate for a situation with a nobleman of so lofty a rank; but he was not to be deterred by any such feeling from making the attempt, and he was soon in Belgrave Square. The Duke of Marchmont was at home, and when Christian mentioned his business, one of the numerous powdered and liveried lackeys who were lounging in the hall conducted the youth to a sumptuously furnished apartment, where his Grace, enveloped in a splendid silk morning-gown, was lounging on a sofa, reading the newspapers, for it was yet early in the forenoon.

We must observe that Christian took great care of his clothes; he was neatly dressed, and from the description already given of him, we need scarcely add that he was not merely respectable-looking, but of an unsurpassable gentility. The duke, slowly turning his head without raising himself up, and lazily depositing the newspaper by his side, surveyed Christian attentively, and then said, "So you have come after the situation of amanuensis?"

"Yes, my lord," was the youth's response, and he trembled with the nervous anxiety of mingled hope and fear.

"First of all," said the duke, "before we speak another word upon the matter, sit down at the table and give me a specimen of your writing."

His Grace then took up the newspaper again, and continued the reading of an article in the midst of which he had left off. Christian sat down, and now that the duke's eyes were no longer upon him, he felt much less embarrassed than at first. He took up a pen, opened a book which lay near, and began to copy on a sheet of paper a portion of its contents. His hand trembled as he first took up that pen, but when he thought of all that was at stake, of how much seemed to depend on this initiative test of his capacities, of his beloved sister Christina, and how she had parted with her raiment on the preceding evening, when he thought, too, of how joyous his heart would be if he were enabled to return and tell her that he had succeeded at length in procuring a situation, he was suddenly inspired with a fortitude which surprised himself, and his hand trembled no more.

"That's enough, I dare say, for me to judge by," exclaimed the duke, at the expiration of about five minutes, and Christian hastened to proffer the paper on which he had been writing. "This is excellent," cried Marchmont; "the very thing! A most gentlemanly hand. I suppose, my lad, you have been well educated?"

Christian replied, with a becoming modesty, that he had certainly been at a good school, and that he hoped he had profited by that opportunity for instructing himself.

"It's the very sort of handwriting that I wanted," proceeded the duke, — "a gentleman's, and not a clerk's. I have had three or four applications this morning, and none would suit. There was one fellow who covered a sheet of paper with as many flourishes as a writing-master, so that my letters would have had the air of so many tradesmen's circulars. You see, young man, I have a great number of letters of various sorts to answer, and as I dislike the trouble of it, my correspondence gets confoundedly into arrear. So I have resolved to take an amanuensis, who will sometimes write to my dictation, and at others make out a good letter from the passing hints I may give him, and from the nature of the correspondence which will in itself be suggestive of the proper response. Now, do you think you can manage this?"

"I should not hesitate, my lord, to undertake it with confidence," answered Christian, hope rising still higher in his soul. "But if your Grace would give me some letter to put my capacity to a further test —"

"No, no, I don't think it is necessary," interrupted the duke. "You are well spoken, and genteel, which last is another great recommendation in your favour. I think that I may safely give you a trial. The terms I propose are fifty guineas a year, and as you will live in the house, you will of course have nothing to find except your clothes."

"Live in the house, my lord," murmured Christian, hope sinking again to the very bottom of his heart, where it became well-nigh extinguished, for the thought of separating from Christina was not to be endured.

"Oh, yes," said the duke, carelessly, "you must live in the house, so that you may always be at hand; because it is not to be supposed that I can ever be ready at stated hours to attend to my correspondence."

"My lord, I am exceedingly sorry — I deeply regret — the situation would have pleased me so — but, but —" and the tears came into the poor youth's eyes.

"Why, what's the matter?" demanded Marchmont, sharply. "If it don't suit you, you can retire, and there's an end of the business."

"Oh, my lord, it suits me — it would be the saving of me!" exclaimed Christian, with much feeling. "But I have a sister dependent on me. We are orphans — I could not separate from her — "

" A sister? " observed the duke, and it immediately struck him that if she were as beautiful as Christian himself was handsome, he should have no objection to become acquainted with her. " And pray how old is your sister? "

" My own age, my lord; we are twins."

" Twins, eh? " ejaculated Marchmont, more and more interested, for now he felt convinced that there must be a great similitude between the brother and sister, and therefore no doubt remained as to the beauty of the latter. " And pray, how old are you? "

" Seventeen and a half, my lord," replied Christian.

" And what is your name? " inquired Marchmont.

" Christian Ashton," was the response.

The duke was somewhat struck by the name; he thought he had heard it before; he reflected for a few moments, and all of a sudden it occurred to him that Lord Octavian Meredith had mentioned the name of Ashton as that of the beautiful creature for whom he had fought the duel with Mr. Stanhope. But the duke did not suffer Christian to perceive that he was in any way struck by the name, and after a pause, he quietly asked, " Where do you live? "

The youth named the address in Park Street, Camden Town, and Marchmont recollected that it was not the same mentioned to him by Lord Octavian as that where his Grace was to call in the event of Meredith succumbing in the duel. But all in a moment another thought flashed to Marchmont's mind. Octavian had represented his " fair unknown " as having been seen walking with a youth whom by the striking likeness he knew to be her brother. Putting two and two together, the duke, who was cunning enough in such matters, began to surmise that Miss Ashton must have been Octavian's " fair unknown." But still there was the discrepancy in regard to the address, and this was to be cleared up, in order to prove that Christian's sister was really the same Miss Ashton who had caused the duel, and whose identity with the " fair unknown " the duke more than half-suspected.

" Have you lived long in Park Street, Camden Town? " he inquired, as if in a careless manner.

" Between nine and ten weeks, my lord. Previously to our removal thither," continued Christian, ingenuously giving his explanations with all becoming candour and frankness, "we dwelt in Mortimer Street, Cavendish Square."

The duke's uncertainty was now completely dissipated, and his mind was made up to take Christian into his service.

"Well, my lad," he said, "I should much rather that you would come and live in the house, but if you object, it shall not stand as a barrier in the way of an arrangement. You appear to suit me in every other respect, and therefore it is a bargain. Go and consult your sister, but I think that if you were wise, you would make up your mind to dwell beneath my roof, and your sister could occupy a lodging somewhere in the neighbourhood, so that you might often be with her when not engaged in writing. I don't suppose you will have more than a couple of hours' work every day, and you would therefore have ample time to pass with your sister. But take your choice; return to me to-morrow morning at this same hour, and let me know your decision. The place is yours, whichsoever way it may be; I promise you that much."

Christian issued forth from the presence of the Duke of Marchmont. He could scarcely restrain his joy as he crossed the spacious landing ornamented with vases and sculptures, as he descended the superb marble staircase, as he traversed the hall where the livery servants were lounging about, and where an old porter of corpulent form and jolly countenance sat in his great leathern chair, reading a newspaper. But when Christian had cleared the threshold of the palatial portals, his heart swelled with such exultation that tears of bliss started from his eyes. He was happy; never had he felt so happy. It was a species of intoxication of the brain that he experienced. To think that when his hopes were at the very lowest, he should thus have procured a situation that was higher than his most ambitious soarings. He sped through the square, he ran along the streets, he leaped into the first omnibus that would take him near to his destination. It seemed as if no journey was ever so long; he was so anxious to reach his humble home, and impart the joyous intelligence to his dearly beloved twin sister.

But before Christian reaches the lodging, let us see what Christina herself has been doing in the interval. Her brother had gone out early, as the reader will recollect, and had promised to return in a few hours to escort his sister in her search for needlework. Christina hastened to put their two little chambers into becoming order, and when she had done this, she descended to the landlady's own parlour, and began to consult her in respect to her position. Mrs. Giles was a good-natured woman, kind-hearted and benevolent, and considerably different from her acquaintance, Mrs. Macaulay. She had suspected for some little time past that the twins were not very comfortable in their circumstances, and she often had it on the tip of her tongue to speak some sympathizing words, or to proffer advice if she were enabled to afford any. But Christian and Christina had a certain pride of their own — a very natural one too — which prompted them to keep up their respectability as well as they could in the eyes of their landlady; and though they were most courteous and affable toward her, they had never thrown themselves in the way of any lengthy discourse. Now, however, Christina had laid aside all that sense of shame which had hitherto kept her silent; she frankly told Mrs. Giles how her brother and herself were situated, and expressed her fears that they must surrender up their present lodging and betake themselves to a still cheaper one.

" My dear young lady," answered Mrs. Giles, " you need not vex and annoy yourself about your rent. Remain here as long as you like, and pay me when you can."

Christina expressed her deep gratitude to the worthy woman, but declared that neither she nor her brother would wilfully contract a debt which they had no immediate prospect of liquidating.

" I am not at all surprised," said the landlady, " that both yourself and your brother have failed in procuring such employments as you have sought. Master Ashton is too genteel to go and apply for a clerk's place, because, being so young, he could only expect small remuneration, and an employer would fancy that he could not make a hard-working drudge of such an elegant gentlemanly young man who carries his fine spirit in his very countenance. As for needlework, my dear Miss Ashton, there are so many thousands and thousands of poor creatures scrambling to get whatever there is to do in that way, that a great many must of course go without."

" Yes, I feel that it is so," answered Christina, with a profound sigh. " I would do anything," she added, bursting into tears, "to earn bread for myself and my brother. I had intended to go again into the City presently, and inquire at some of the clothing marts for work, but a thought just now struck me, and I made up my mind to consult you on the subject. Do you think that I could possibly procure the situation of companion to some lady, or even the situation of maid, — anything, in short, that would relieve my mind from the dreadful anxiety which now fills it. It would be hard, oh, very hard, to separate from my brother. I used to feel how hard it was when, as boy and girl, we parted to go to our respective schools after the holidays. But it would be harder still to see that poor brother of mine want bread; and indeed I cannot bear the thought that day after day he runs about in weariness, seeking for employment, humbling himself to purse-proud men, and meeting rebuffs which cut him to the very soul and pierce mine also."

Christina wept; indeed for a few minutes she sobbed convulsively, Mrs. Giles saying all she possibly could to cheer and console her.

"Ah! now I think of it," suddenly exclaimed the worthy woman, with joy upon her countenance, "I do really believe there is an opening for you."

The young girl hastily wiped away her tears, and listened with eager suspense.

"My daughter," continued Mrs. Giles, "is housemaid in a nobleman's family close by here, in the Regent's Park. Jessy — that's my daughter's name, — and a good girl she is, too, though I say it — was here last evening, and she told me that her ladyship wanted a companion, some nice, genteel young person, — in a word, I am sure, Miss Ashton, that you would suit in every particular. And her ladyship is so amiable and good and kind, and his lordship is such a nice man. They have not long been married — "

"Oh, if it were possible," exclaimed Christina, joy expanding in her heart, "that I could obtain such a situation!"

"I really think you will obtain it, miss," answered the landlady, "and though I should be sorry to lose you as a lodger, I should nevertheless be well pleased to know that you were comfortably situated. You had better go about it at once."

"I will," cried the young girl, "and a thousand thanks to you for the intelligence you have given me and the kind wishes you have expressed."

Christina hastened up to her own chamber, put on the best apparel which she could command, and descended to Mrs. Giles's room again, to inquire the address to which she was to proceed. The landlady had already written it down for her, and Christina, with renewed thanks, issued forth from the house. As she entered the Regent's Park, she suddenly recollected the insulting conduct she had experienced on a former occasion, and she almost repented that she had not awaited her brother's return to escort her. But then, what happiness would it be for her if, when he came back to the lodging, she should be enabled to give him the assurance that thenceforth they would both have bread. The idea of separation was the only drawback to the happiness which Christina felt she should experience if her present mission proved successful, but still she argued with herself that when persons are enmeshed in difficulties, it is almost invariably necessary to make certain sacrifices in order to escape from them. Thus reflecting, she continued her way, she crossed the Regent's Park without experiencing any fresh insult, and she at length knocked at the door of a house, of very genteel appearance, though not of very spacious dimensions.

To her inquiry whether Lady Octavian Meredith was at home and could be seen at such an early hour in the forenoon, she received an affirmative response, and was at once conducted to a parlour where Zoe, in a morning *déshabillé*, was seated upon a sofa. Christina was already prepossessed, by what Mrs. Giles had said, in favour of Lady Octavian Meredith, but her good opinion was enhanced at the very first glance which she flung upon Mr. Armytage's daughter. It was not so much that the exquisite beauty of Zoe interested the young girl, as that the goodness and sweetness depicted on Lady Octavian Meredith's lovely countenance were well calculated to inspire confidence and hope. The dark velvet covering of the sofa threw out Zoe's form in admirable relief, arrayed as it was in a light morning garb; her hair, without any ornament, showered in ringlets upon her shoulders, and it was with a gracious encouraging smile that Zoe, on learning Christina's business, bade her sit down. Lady Octavian Meredith herself was struck with the extraordinary beauty of Christina, — a beauty which was in such perfect contrast with her own, inasmuch as Miss Ashton's hair and eyes were dark, while those of her ladyship were of a light, angelic style. But it would have been difficult for an observer to decide which was the more beautiful of the two, although perhaps Christina might have carried off the palm.

There was no shade of jealousy, no, not even the slightest tinge thereof, in Zoe's disposition, and therefore when Miss Ashton announced the object of her visit, it did not for a single moment occur to Lady Octavian Meredith that there might possibly be some danger in introducing so transcendingly beautiful a creature into the house. Besides, in the same way that Christina was interested by Zoe's appearance, so was the latter at once prepossessed with regard to the former; and Lady Octavian Meredith found herself inwardly expressing the hope that the applicant would prove a suitable candidate for the position she had come to seek.

"It is perfectly true," said Zoe, in her sweet, musical voice, "that I wish to enter into an engagement with a young lady who will live with me as a friend," for she could not utter the word companion, which in that particular sense might convey the offensive significancy of a toady. "Lord Octavian Meredith is, as a matter of course, frequently out; it is natural that he should seek those companions with whom his position enables him to associate, and I occasionally feel myself somewhat dull and lonely. You are aware that in what is called the fashionable world, visits are not paid until late in the afternoon, and then they are mere flying ones, and I am fain to confess that the conversation is usually frivolous and unsatisfactory. Thus I am many hours alone, and I cannot always while away the time with my books, my music, or my work. Therefore I seek the friendship of a young lady of amiable manners, of intellectual acquirements, and of certain accomplishments. She may rely upon kind treatment; she shall never find herself in a false position; she shall be as one of the family, subject to no restraint nor coercion, and to be regarded as on a perfect equality with myself. I have been thus candid and frank, thus lengthy in my explanations, so that you may understand, Miss Ashton, my requirement and all its circumstances."

The reader must bear in mind that Zoe was utterly ignorant of the acquaintance of her husband with Christina, equally unaware of the adventure in the park nine weeks back, equally unaware also of the duel which had followed. On the other hand, Christina was as completely ignorant that accident had brought her to the house belonging to him whom she only knew as Mr. Percival, and of course equally ignorant that she was in the presence of that individual's wife.

" I thank your ladyship," answered Miss Ashton, " for the explanations you have given me, and I fully appreciate the delicate terms in which they have been conveyed. With equal frankness will I place before your ladyship the humble claims which I have to submit to your notice. I was well educated, and was instructed in some few accomplishments, though I am not vain enough to say that I possess any. I am fond of music, I love drawing in water colours or with pencil, I am equally attached to a certain style of reading, — chiefly history, biography, books of travel, and such instructive works. I have every disposition to render myself agreeable and useful, and I may confidently add that I shall repay with gratitude whatsoever kindness is shown me. My position is somewhat a painful one. I have a twin brother, and we are orphans. We are likewise friendless. A recent calamity has deprived us of the resources which we previously possessed — I allude to the sudden flight of a person who lived on the other side of the Regent's Park — "

" Do you mean Mr. Preston? " inquired Zoe, with some degree of surprise.

" The same, my lady," answered Christina.

" And it was my own father, Mr. Armytage," rejoined Zoe, " who first discovered that man's delinquencies, and I regret to say that he too has suffered by them. Is he a relation of yours? "

" Oh, no, my lady! " responded Christina; " we have not to our knowledge any relations in the world. Our parents died when we were quite young; we were brought up by an uncle, who was a widower, and to him were we indebted for the good education we received. He died suddenly, and immediately after the funeral, Mr. Preston announced himself to us as the person to whom we had thenceforth to look for supplies of money. It was by his desire that we came up to London, and he regularly furnished us with an income until the period of his flight. Since then we have experienced troubles and afflictions — "

Here Christina stopped short and burst into tears. Lady Octavian Meredith was much affected by the orphan girl's narrative, and she spoke in a kind, soothing manner. Christina, when again able to speak, informed her ladyship that she and her brother had resided six months at Mrs. Macaulay's, and upwards of two months at Mrs. Giles's, both of whom could speak as to their characters and conduct.

" Mrs. Giles is a most respectable woman," observed Zoe, " and I am very certain that she would not recommend you to me unless perfectly assured that there was propriety in so doing. Forgive me if for a moment I have alluded to such matters as recommendations and so forth — "

" It is necessary, my lady, and it is better," replied Christina. " If I have the good fortune to please your ladyship, I should wish to enter your house in the fullest confidence that you are satisfied with me."

" I am already satisfied, from everything which you have told me," rejoined Lady Octavian Meredith, " and I will request my husband to use his interest to procure some suitable situation for your brother. I can understand, from all you have said, that it would be painful for you to separate from that brother, but you have my free permission to receive him as often as he may choose to call upon you, — the oftener the better, for it will do me good to behold you happy and contented. I am already much interested in you, Miss Ashton, and I am grateful that Mrs. Giles should have counselled you to visit my house to-day."

Christina expressed her warmest thanks for all these kind assurances, and Lady Octavian Meredith proceeded, in the most delicate and considerate manner, to intimate the terms which she proposed to offer any young lady whom she might select as her friend. In a word, the compact was formed, and Christina promised to remove to her ladyship's house on the morrow.

" I shall take the liberty of requesting Mrs. Giles," said Christina, when rising to depart, " to call upon your ladyship in the course of the day, that she may confirm, so far as she knows me, the representations that I have made, and as she is acquainted with my former landlady, she can give your ladyship such assurances as Mrs. Macaulay herself would impart if referred to."

"It is by no means necessary," answered Zoe, "but inasmuch as I see that it will satisfy you, Miss Ashton, you can bid Mrs. Giles call upon me presently."

Zoe rose from her seat, and extended her hand with sweetest affability to Christina, who, with renewed thanks and with joy in her heart, took her leave. Thus, while Christina was retracing her way across the Regent's Park, Christian, having alighted from the omnibus, was speeding along Albany Street, also in a homeward direction. Neither had the faintest suspicion of the good fortune which had suddenly smiled upon the other; each heart was full of joy on the other's account. But that of Christina was somewhat shaded, because in her case it was settled that she must separate from her brother; whereas in Christian's case it had been left by the Duke of Marchmont to his own option as to whether he should live at the mansion in Belgrave Square, or still continue to reside with his sister.

Christina reached the lodging first, and at once informed Mrs. Giles of the success of her visit to Lady Octavian Meredith. She likewise requested the worthy woman to call upon her ladyship in the course of the day.

"That I shall do with pleasure," was the response cheerfully given; "indeed I shall set off at once, and you may depend upon it, my dear young lady, I shall say everything in your favour which you so fully deserve."

Christina hastened up-stairs, and scarcely had she put off her walking apparel, when Christian came rushing up as if he were wild. He burst into the room, and folding his sister in a warm embrace, cried, "Joy, joy, darling Christina. I have succeeded at length."

"And I too, my beloved brother, have succeeded in something," she responded, with an almost equal exultation.

Christian contemplated her with surprise, and mutual explanations were speedily given. But Christian was now saddened at the idea of separating from his sister.

"His Grace," he said, mournfully, "left it to me to decide whether I would live at his mansion, or continue to dwell with you, and I had arranged in my mind such a nice little plan of removing into the neighbourhood of Belgrave Square, so that we might be together — "

"But, my dear brother," interrupted Christina, though with tears in her eyes, "we must resign ourselves to this separation. From what you have told me, the Duke of Marchmont offers you fifty guineas a year, — a most liberal sum, if you dwell in his mansion, but it would instantly become a small one if you resided in lodgings and had to support me. Lady Octavian Meredith offers me sixty guineas a year, and I am to dwell with her. We can both save considerably from our incomes, and perhaps, my dear brother, in the course of time our economies will enable us to reside together again. Besides, Lady Octavian assures me that the oftener you call upon me the better she shall be pleased, and the Duke of Marchmont has informed you that you will have plenty of time at your own disposal. We may see each other daily, or nearly every day; we may walk out together — Oh, indeed, dear Christian, we shall make ourselves happy! And remember what a change these few brief hours have suddenly worked for us. Last night we ate the bread of bitterness; to-day we shall eat the bread of happiness. This morning we rose in mournfulness from our respective beds; to-night we shall lay ourselves upon our pillows with hope, consolation, and thankfulness in our hearts. We shall close our eyes in slumber without the dread of the morrow's awakening."

Christian could offer no remonstrances against this reasoning on his sister's part, and the arrangements were therefore to the effect that he should return in the course of the day to the Duke of Marchmont to state the decision to which he had come, so that on the morrow he might remove to his Grace's mansion, at the same time that his sister took up her residence with Lady Octavian Meredith.

In the course of a couple of hours Mrs. Giles returned from her visit to Zoe, and she now learned the good fortune which had simultaneously overtaken Christian. She congratulated the twins with the most genuine sincerity, and placing an envelope in Christina's hand, said, "Lady Octavian Meredith is already so deeply interested in you, and is so fearful of losing you, that she has desired me to tender you this as a ratification of the compact."

Mrs. Giles then hastened from the room, and Christina, on opening the envelope, found that it contained a banknote for twenty pounds. The orphans were deeply touched by this proof of Lady Octavian's generosity and kindness, and all the more so on account of the delicate manner in which the succour was conveyed.

Christian hastened off again to the Duke of Marchmont's residence, and when it was dusk, Christina went forth to redeem her wearing apparel from the pawnbroker's. With very different feelings from those which she had experienced on the previous evening was it that she now entered the place, and she returned with a light heart to the lodging, to prepare a comfortable meal against her brother's reappearance. And it was the bread of happiness which the twins ate that night, scarcely saddened by the idea of separation, because they felt it was for their mutual good.

But when the morrow came and the hour for separation arrived, they wept and renewed again and again the farewell embrace ere they tore themselves asunder.

CHAPTER XX

THE BURKER

The scene which we are about to describe occurred on the same evening as Christina's visit to the pawnbroker.

It was between nine and ten o'clock that a man of most ill-favoured appearance emerged from one of the low courts opening from the New Cut, Lambeth, and bent his way in the direction of the maze of densely populated streets and alleys which lie between the lower parts of the Waterloo and Westminster Roads. This man was about forty years of age, and it would be impossible to conceive a human exterior so repulsive, or so fearfully calculated to make the blood of a beholder curdle in the veins. There are some physiognomies which impress one with a capacity for particular sorts of mischief; there are features, for instance, which indicate low cunning, others denote violent passions, and there are others which reveal an instinctive thirst for blood. But all the most terrible attributes of the human mind were concentrated in the expression of that man's countenance. He had a small snub nose, which appeared to have been stuck on to his face as if it were an afterthought of nature; his mouth was large, and was furnished with a set of sharp pointed sharklike teeth, which being naturally white, and remaining so in defiance of neglect, glittered horribly between his coarse, thick lips. His eyes were of the dark colour and expression of a reptile's, and the brows, by being traced irregularly, — or else being brought down by an habitual lowering regard, — added to the shuddering sensation produced by a look from those horrible eyes. His hair — of a light brown, and already turning gray — was completely matted; his whiskers, of a darker colour, were equally ragged and unkempt. He was dressed in a loose drab upper garment that appeared to be a coachman's greatcoat with a portion of the skirts cut off. A dirty cotton handkerchief was tied negligently about his neck, and his trousers, of a dingy gray, hung loose as if he wore no braces. His hands were thrust into the pockets on the outer side of the coat, and under one arm he held a short stick, which, however, might be more aptly denominated a club. From beneath the leathern front of his well-worn cap his looks were flung hastily around when he emerged from the court, as if his conscience were not altogether so clear as to place his personal freedom beyond the possibility of inconvenient molestation.

Continuing his way, and passing rapidly through several streets, — evidently with a settled purpose in view, — he at length relaxed his pace near a house in the midst of that maze of lanes, alleys, and courts to which we have already alluded. It was a house that had a small dissenting chapel on one side, and a beer shop on the other, and it must be observed that next to the chapel there was a narrow alley with a low arched entrance. The house to which we are particularly alluding, and which stood between the chapel and the beer shop, was a small one, for it was a poor street, but there was nothing in its exterior to detract from its air of humble respectability. A small brass plate on the front door indicated that it was occupied by a person named John Smedley, whose calling was that of gold-beater. This was further illustrated by a gilt arm, the fist clutching a hammer, which appeared over the ground-floor window. That window had green blinds, and if a passer-by peeped over them, he would look into a little parlour that was furnished neatly enough. The two windows of the first floor front had dark moreen curtains, for this floor was let to a lodger. When unoccupied, a neatly written card, conveying the intimation of "Lodgings to let," would be seen in the lower window, but the ticket was not there now, inasmuch as the apartments referred to had a tenant.

Mr. and Mrs. Smedley had the reputation in the neighbourhood of being respectable people enough, although whispering rumour declared that the wife was somewhat attached to strong waters; but on the other hand, the husband was regular in his attendance at the dissenting chapel next door, so that the minister regarded him as one of his "choicest and most savoury vessels." He was a man of about eight and thirty, with a mean, insignificant countenance, in the expression of which it was difficult to find an index of his real character or disposition. A very close observer, if experienced in reading the human heart, would have had some misgivings relative to the sincerity of Mr. Smedley's religious devotion, and might perhaps have caught the glitter of hypocritical cunning underneath the gloss of sanctimoniousness which he habitually wore. His wife was a tall and rather well-made woman, with large features, and a look that indicated decision of character. She had dark hair and eyes, and somewhat a gipsy cast of countenance, which was enhanced by her olive complexion. She generally wore her hair floating over her shoulders, and though there was a certain bold hardihood in her looks, yet the neighbours were acquainted with nothing prejudicial to her reputation as a wife. She was three or four years younger than her husband, but kept him under the completest control.

The Smedleys had no children, but they had a companion and an assistant in the person of Mrs. Smedley's mother. She was a woman of about sixty, with the same style of features as her daughter, though more angular and prominent with the effects of age, and there was certainly something sinister, if not actually repulsive, in her looks. She aided her daughter in the household work, and especially attended upon the lodger who occupied the apartments on the first floor. It was rumoured that Mrs. Webber — for that was the old woman's name — possessed some little means of her own, and this opinion appeared to be confirmed from the fact that the Smedleys were tolerably comfortable in their circumstances, and lived in a better style than either the gold-beating avocation or that of letting a portion of their house to a lodger could possibly warrant. Indeed, John Smedley did not appear to be overburdened with work, for he was often sauntering about the neighbourhood, either for his recreation or else to distribute tracts amongst those whom he denominated his "benighted brethren and sisters." As for Mrs. Smedley and the mother they seldom stirred out of the house, except on a Sunday, when they sometimes accompanied the gold-beater to chapel, but they were not by any means so regular in their attendance as he himself was.

The ill-favoured man whom we introduced at the beginning of this chapter was named Barnes, but was more familiarly called Barney by his intimates, and sometimes he was spoken of, though never addressed to his face, as Barney the Burker; it having been suspected that some years previously to the time of which we are writing he had been connected with the diabolical gang whose wholesale murders produced consternation throughout the country. But as we have just hinted, it was by no means safe to throw out the imputation to Barnes's face, for the savage vindictiveness of his character and his implacable ferocity would have at once prompted him to inflict a terrible chastisement on whomsoever he might regard as giving him offence.

Relaxing his pace, as we have said, when he drew near the gold-beater's house, he flung his looks hastily around, evidently to assure himself that he was not observed, and then he made a sudden dive under the low arch which led into the alley by the side of the chapel. This alley had an opening at the farther extremity, communicating with a small vacant space behind the chapel, and which was separated by a low wall from the yard at the rear of the Smedleys' house. Over this wall Barney the Burker at once clambered, and alighting in the yard, he without ceremony entered the dwelling by the back door. Though it was dark within, he evidently knew the premises well, for he immediately began to descend a flight of steps, and thus reached an underground place, which being behind the kitchen might be described as the scullery. Here a light burned upon a small deal table, at which the Smedleys and Mrs. Webber were seated, with bottles and glasses before them. A massive door on one side communicated with a cellar, and another door led into the front kitchen.

It may possibly be wondered wherefore the Smedleys and the old woman were enjoying themselves on the present occasion in so damp, gloomy, and dungeon-like a place as the scullery, where there was no grate, and consequently no fire, and this too being the cold winter season. But they had business of a particular nature to discuss, and a particular visitor to receive. They did not therefore choose to sit in the parlour, lest passers-by should peep in through the crevices of the shutters, or stand to listen to what was being said; and as there was an iron grating over the front kitchen window, down which anybody might look if lights were burning there, they had similar reasons for avoiding that place. There were certainly other rooms in which they might have met, — such for instance as the back parlour on the ground floor, which served as John Smedley's workshop when he had any work to do, but then there was the fear of the lodger overhearing anything that was said, and thus was it that the scullery served as the most convenient part of the house for the business that was in hand. What this business was will soon transpire, but the reader has already seen that Barney the Burker was the visitor who was expected.

He made his appearance with the air of one who was no stranger, but on the contrary was on exceedingly good terms with the gold-beater and the two women. Just nodding familiarly to them all three, he took a seat, dropped his club on one side, and his cap on the other, and then proceeded to help himself to a stiff glass of gin and water.

" Well, this is a night for blue ruin, hot and strong," he said, grinning so as to display his sharklike teeth, and speaking in a voice that was of habitual hoarseness. " It's uncommon cold, and I wonder you ain't quaking all over with the shivers in this here well of a place."

" You see, my good fellow," replied Smedley, " that it answers very well as a council-room — "

" Come, let's to business," interrupted Mrs. Smedley, sharply, as she bent a peremptory look upon her husband to silence him, for he was fond of talking, but she was not fond of listening to him.

" My dear Bab, don't be so fast upon one," rejoined Smedley, in a deprecating manner, and here we may observe that his wife's name was Barbara, for which Bab was used as a diminutive.

" Well, what's in the wind now? " asked the Burker. " I got your message, Jack," he continued, thus addressing Smedley, " which you sent by Tim Scott this arternoon — "

" Ah, Tim Scott is a sharp lad," interjected the old woman, " and I think he's indebted to you, Barney, for his edication."

" Well, ma'am," replied the Burker, " I certainly have done summut in that way for Tim Scott. But he don't come up to his big brother Bill in artfulness — not by no manner of means. Howsomever, he'll get on in time, and then let me tell yer there won't be two such rare fellers in all London as them Scotts, — chaps arter my own heart."

"To be sure," said Mrs. Smedley, with an approving look. "You require such instruments."

"You're right enow there," exclaimed the Burker, with a terrible imprecation. "To get a livin' nowadays, a man ought to have a dozen hands and arms, and them too always at work, and he ought to have a dozen pair of eyes, to see which way the wind blows, — ay, by jingo! and a dozen pair of legs, too, to run away from them bluebottle rascals, or the sneaking detectives, when there's a hue and cry arter him. I tell yer what it is, them as has the power is making the country one that ain't fit to live in, what with their newfangled laws and so on. Why, if I only stand a minute or two in the street, just to take a look at what is going on, up comes a bluebottle and stares at me fust of all as if there was threats of treadmills in his eyes, and then he bids me move off just as if his tongue had borrowed its tones from the knocker of Newgate. But if I happen to look raythe hard at some swell cove passing along, and chance to foller in the same direction, then, by jingo! I'd better cut and run for it; or else up afore the beak, no one to speak to my character, all in wain to say I'm a honest 'ard-working man, but off to the stone jug, and six weeks on the everlasting staircase as a rogue and wagabone."

Mr. Barnes the Burker's language increased in vehemence and bitterness as he thus enumerated his wrongs, and when he had finished, he struck the table so violently with his fist that the bottles, jugs, and glasses appeared as if they were dancing a reel. Then, after a pause, during which the injured man looked slowly around upon his listeners to ascertain the effect which his words had produced, he added, doggedly, "And all that's called justice."

"I'm afraid times have been as bad with you lately," said Mrs. Smedley, "as they have with us. For a matter of ten months we had no lodger — "

"Till this present one come," observed the Burker. "Well, and what do you make out of him? for I suppose it's about that you sent up the message to me to-day by young Tim Scott."

"Right enough, Barney," exclaimed Smedley. "He's a queer file, that old fellow up-stairs — "

"Old indeed!" said Mrs. Webber, who was herself sixty, and therefore she spoke with some degree of indignation; "he is not more than fifty, and I am sure I call that quite young."

"Nonsense, mother," interposed Bab Smedley, with her usual sharpness. "Don't waste time about such silly trifles;" then lowering her voice to a mysterious whisper, she said to the Burker, "We mean to do it."

"And right enow, too," he answered; "if so be you've made sure it's worth while."

"Trust us for that," responded Bab. "My mother, though she is so silly in some respects, is precious sharp in others, and she has wormed herself into the lodger's good graces — "

"What's his name again?" inquired Barney.

"Smith," responded Bab; "but of course we knew very well, the moment he came to the house, that it wasn't his right name. He looked so wild and frightened, and seemed glad to be able to hide himself anywhere, and when I had showed him the lodgings, told him what the price was, and asked for a reference, he said he couldn't give any, but he would pay his rent in advance. And then I asked him his name, and he seemed to hesitate for a minute whether he should call himself Brown, Jones, Thompson, or Smith."

"And he has never once been out since he came here," observed Smedley, taking up the tale; "never once crossed the threshold of the front door."

"And he has been all of a nervous fidget the whole time," said Mrs. Webber. "Ah! and how he has altered too. I shouldn't have thought that a matter of a little more than two months could have made such a change in a human being. But that's why you, Jack," she added, turning to her son-in-law, "call him old. His face is as thin and as pale as a ghost's; he wasn't very fat when he first came, but he has so shrunk away that his clothes hang on him just as if they were never made for him at all."

"But has he got the ready?" demanded Barney; "for that's the principal thing we have got to look at."

"We know he has got some money," responded Bab, "and I will tell you how we found it out. It was only the first thing this morning that we discovered it, but we all along suspected that he had a hoard, though he did come without anything but a small carpet-bag — "

"Well, but about the money?" asked the Burker, mixing himself another glass of hot spirits and water.

"Why, you see," resumed Bab, "my mother went up as usual this morning to ask him about his dinner, and she gave him his weekly bill to pay. So — "

"Let me tell the story, Bab," interrupted the old woman. "You must know, Barney, that he's always in a constant tremble, and every time the door is opened, he looks as frightened as if he expected to see the constables walk in. Well, when I gave him his bill, he put his hand into his pocket, and in his agitation, instead of one purse, he drew out two. Then he got terribly confused, and shoved one of the purses back again, but not before I had time to see that it was well filled with gold at one end, and I rather think, but of course I can't be sure, with banknotes at the other. He got into conversation, and talked more familiar than he had ever done before, telling me that he had a deal of trouble on his mind, that he didn't think he should get over it, and then he stopped short, looked very hard at me, and seemed as if he was sorry for letting out so much as he had done. I told him I thought he was ill and wanted the doctor, but I only said that just to try and draw him out further, for I can tell easy enough he has something on his mind."

"I shouldn't wonder," observed Barney, "if he has run away from his place of employment, or summut of that sort, perhaps bolted off with the contents of the cash-box. But go on, Mrs. Webber."

"Well," continued the old woman, "Mr. Smith said he didn't want no doctor; he wouldn't see any one, but he thought he should go on the Continent for change of air — "

"He won't, though," said the Burker, with a look of savage ferocity, "if he has got all that gold in his purse. I'm raything hard up just at this moment. All my togs, you see, is in Queer Street," and he looked slowly down at his coarse, sordid apparel.

"Now you know as much of him as we do," remarked Bab Smedley, taking up the thread of the discourse. "So, when mother told us all that, — how she had seen the second purse, and how he had hinted about going away, we thought the best thing we could do was to send up to you at once, to tell you to come down this evening and talk over the business. But hark! the up-stairs bell has just rung. Go, mother, quick, and see what he wants."

Mrs. Webber accordingly bustled up the flight of steps, and having remained absent for five minutes, she reappeared in the scullery.

"He has made up his mind to leave," she said, in a mysterious whisper, and with still more ominously mysterious looks. "He says he shall go the day after to-morrow, and he asked if I could get somebody who might be trusted to deliver a letter to-morrow — "

"To be sure," interjected the Burker, with a significant leer. "You said yes, of course?"

"Of course I did," responded the old woman, almost indignantly, as if she thought that it was an insult to doubt the nature of the reply she had given. "Who knows but that the letter may be a full confession of all the wrong he has done? Perhaps it will be to the people he has robbed, for that he has done something of the sort, there can't be the slightest uncertainty."

"Not a bit of it," said Bab, assentingly. "But under present circumstances, we won't do anything to-night; we will wait till to-morrow night. We will read the letter that he wants to send, and maybe it will put him so much in our power that we may be able to make him give up to us all he has got, and so save us the necessity of — you know what," and with a darkly sinister look, she glanced down to that part of the floor where the table stood upon a small square piece of drugget.

"Ay," said the Burker, "that's the best plan. If as how we can get it by fair means, well and good, and if not, then — "

And lifting up his club, he shook it in a significant manner, his countenance at the same time becoming so diabolically ferocious that even his accomplices in crime could not prevent themselves from shuddering.

"That place has seen one or two go down," observed Jack Smedley, "and may be it will see another before we are much older."

"Yes, you and me have done a little business together in our time, Jack," responded the Burker, as if the antecedents just alluded to were a subject for satisfactory retrospection. "So, may our friendship never be less," and with this sentiment the ruffian nodded to his three accomplices as he raised the glass to his lips.

"Good heavens! that the burning alcohol did not choke the miscreant whose tongue had thus impiously perverted the sacred name of friendship, and had made it the illustration of his own horrible ideas of fellowship and intimacy. For it was a frightful friendship, if the word can be so used, which linked him with that man and with those two women, — a friendship which held them together for the sake of crimes the darkest and the deepest, a terrible intimacy, that was cemented with blood, a fellowship such as that which may be supposed to prevail in pandemonium. Yet those wretches dared look each other in the face, and if three of them shuddered for an instant at the frightful expression which appeared upon the countenance of the fourth, it was not that they were stricken with remorse for past misdeeds, nor with loathing for their associate, but merely that there was an instinctive recoil from a physical ugliness which the reflex of a blood-stained soul at the instant rendered intolerable for any eyes to gaze upon.

"Ah! it's an uncommon convenient place, isn't it, Barney?" observed Jack Smedley, after a pause which had followed the ruffian's sentiment, and the gold-beater, as he thus spoke, looked down upon the drugget as his wife had previously done. "Now, what things do go on in London. Who would suspect — "

"Don't be so silly, Jack," interrupted Bab. "One would think you were going to moralize on the secrets that this house could reveal if it liked. I am always afraid of your tongue — "

"No, you needn't be afeard," interrupted the Burker. "I've knowed Jack Smedley long enough to be sure that he's as downy as the knocker at Newgate, and as safe and tight as the stone jug itself. Why, let me see, it's a matter of ten year you've been in this house, and you've kept up a good name the whole time."

"It was my dodge, the joining in with the chaps next door," observed Smedley, with a triumphant grin expanding over his mean-looking countenance, "and let me tell you it's the very best dodge that ever was. They take me for as snivelling and sanctimonious a fellow as themselves."

"To be sure they do," ejaculated Barney, "and it's a dodge you must keep up. I thought of taking to it myself, only when I peep in the glass I can't bring my mind to the belief that my looks is the wery best that's suited for putting on a psalm-singing mug. No, that gammon won't do for me; I must stick to what I am. Besides, I shall make summut of them two Scots soon. But I'll tell you what's wanted."

"And what's that?" inquired Bab Smedley.

"Just to look on such a business as we may perhaps have here to-morrow night," answered the Burker. "There's no use for chaps like the Scotts to think of launching theirselves regular in the profession till they've see summut of that sort. They've got mischief enow in 'em, but they want hardenin'. I understand it right well enow. I know what human nature is. One must be deep in for it, as the sayin' is, before one is at all times ready to go the whole hog. The feelin's must be blunted. Bless you! it's experience as does it all. Why should we be a-sitting here and talking so cool over a little affair of this sort, if we hadn't gone through it all afore? To be sure not," and as if to clench the argument, the Burker again struck his fist forcibly upon the table.

"Hush," said Bab Smedley, "not so loud! The old man up-stairs may hear you."

"I suppose he hasn't no suspicion?" asked Barney.

"Not a bit," ejaculated Mrs. Webber. "He takes me for a nice, good-natured, comfortable matron that tries to do all she can for him, and he thinks that Jack is everything that all the neighbours think him. As for Bab, he one day said to me that my son-in-law ought to be proud of such a fine, handsome wife — "

"And so he ought," exclaimed Mrs. Smedley, flinging upon her husband a look which was as much as to reproach him for not glorifying himself sufficiently in the possession of his spouse.

"Well," said the Burker, "I think I'll be jogging now, and I'll look down to-morrow night, betwixt nine and ten o'clock, to see what has been done or what is to be done."

He rose from his seat, drained his glass, nodded familiarly to his three accomplices, stole gently up the flight of steps, and issued forth into the back yard. Having clambered over the wall again, he passed out of the narrow alley, and betook himself toward his own dwelling. This, as already stated, was in a court leading out of the New Cut, which is a large thoroughfare connecting the Waterloo and Blackfriars Roads. Entering a house in this dark court, — the atmosphere of which, although in the winter-time, appeared to breathe infection, feculence, and filth, — Barney the Burker ascended to a back room, where two lads were seated at a table playing a game of dominoes. The room was wretchedly furnished, and had two beds spread upon the floor. One was the couch of the Burker; the other was for the use of the brothers.

Bill Scott, the elder, was a most singular-looking being: his ugliness was sufficiently ludicrous to provoke laughter, were it not that the entire expression of his countenance denoted deep innate villainy. He was not above eighteen years of age, and his face seemed that of an old man. It was pale and haggard, and even prematurely wrinkled, with the effects of a career of dissipation commenced early and continuously pursued. The very hair had left all the upper part of his forehead, and where it remained on the rest of the head, it was thin and lanky; being too of a light flaxen colour, it might at the first glance be taken for gray, thus adding to the aged appearance of his countenance. He had large goggle eyes, a little snub nose, very much resembling that of his precious preceptor in the ways of wickedness, immense ears, and a mouth of commensurate proportions. In shape he was almost as thin as a skeleton, and his voice, in its weakness, showed that it had suffered beneath the same attenuating influences which had caused the waste and premature decay of his physical being. His brother Tim was about fifteen, of somewhat stunted growth, short, stout, and thick-set. He also had light hair, which was as matted as that of the Burker himself. There was a certain degree of similitude between the brothers, with the exception of that air of old age, haggardness, and ghastly pallor which characterized the elder one. In addition to their game of dominoes, they were recreating themselves with a quart of porter, to which, however, Bill Scott most frequently paid his addresses.

" So you've come in, have you? " said the Burker, as he entered the room. " And now what luck, boys? "

" Here's a reader, with a flimsy and a quid in it," answered the elder brother, producing a pocketbook containing a five-pound note and a sovereign, and his horrible countenance lighted up with pride and satisfaction as if he had performed the noblest of exploits.

" Well, that's good, my lad," exclaimed the Burker, his own hideous features expanding into a grin. " Better than you have done for the last six weeks! Now, Tim, what's your luck? "

" A yack, a blue billy, and a wedge-feeder," responded the younger thief, producing the results of his own day's work in the shape of a watch, a silk handkerchief (with white spots on a blue ground), and a silver spoon.

" Good again," cried the Burker. " Things is looking up and we mustn't say that trade's been dull or business flat to-day. There's been a good deal doing, seemingly, in the prig's market. So we'll have a jolly good blowout for supper. We'll spend this yaller boy," added the villain, taking up the sovereign, " and to-morrow I'll change the finnip " — meaning the bank-note — " and spout the yack and the feeder. As for the fogle," thus illustrating the handkerchief, " you two shall play a game of dominoes for it, and the winner shall have it."

Having thus settled matters to his own special satisfaction, and to the perfect contentment of the two lads, the respectable Mr. Barnes sent the younger one forth to purchase a quantity of commodities, eatable and drinkable, for the evening's repast, while he lighted his pipe, therewith to recreate himself until the serving up of the proposed banquet.

CHAPTER XXI

CHRISTINA AND LORD OCTAVIAN

It was, as already stated, a sorrowful thing for Christian and Christina to separate from each other; nevertheless there were many circumstances to alleviate the bitterness of the pangs thus felt. Each had obtained an excellent situation, and this good fortune had overtaken them both suddenly, at a period when their circumstances were wearing the most deplorable aspect. Besides, youth is not the time when hearts sink irreclaimably into despondency, and moreover, the twins had the solace of knowing that they should meet frequently, and that in a day or two their first interview after their separation might take place.

Thus, by the time that Christina reached her destination in the cab which bore her thither, her tears were dried, and she had composed herself in order to appear with at least a placid if not a cheerful look in the presence of Lady Octavian Meredith. His lordship was not at home when she arrived; indeed he was out purposely. For the reader may conceive with what astonishment, mingled with trepidation, it was that he learned on the preceding day how accident had led his wife to engage none other than the beautiful Christina Ashton as her companion. His first impulse had been to start an objection, but a second thought had shown him that he could not. He had already cheerfully given the amiable Zoe permission to have such a companion; he dared not now confess to her everything that had passed in respect to himself, Christina, and the duel, and without giving some such explanations, it would appear simply whimsical and capricious in him to remonstrate against the special choice which his wife had made. He was therefore constrained to leave matters as they thus stood, but to devise some means for preventing Christina from being taken by surprise through a sudden recognition, and from giving vent to ejaculations that would reveal past incidents to his wife.

Lord Octavian was therefore purposely out when Christina arrived at his mansion in the forenoon. He knew that Zoe had promised to take luncheon with her father that day, between one and two o'clock, and he calculated that she would not on this occasion take Christina with her, but would leave her new friend to settle herself in the chamber allotted to her, and become somewhat acquainted with the habitation which was now her home. Indeed, that Zoe would act thus, Octavian had partially gleaned from a remark which she made at the breakfast-table. Therefore, when Lord Octavian thought that his wife had gone across the park to her father at the appointed time, he returned to his own dwelling.

Meanwhile Christina had been most cordially welcomed by Zoe, and was at once conducted by the amiable lady to the elegantly furnished apartment which she was to occupy. Zoe at first insisted that one of the maid servants should unpack Christina's boxes and arrange all her things for her in the wardrobe and drawers, but Miss Ashton was not the being to assume the airs of a fine lady, when conscious of her own dependent position, and Zoe was compelled to let her have her own way in this respect. Christina's conduct enhanced her considerably in the good opinion which Lady Octavian Meredith had already formed of her.

When Miss Ashton had finished her little arrangements in her own chamber, she and Zoe passed an hour or two in agreeable conversation, and shortly after one o'clock the lady said, " I am now going to leave you to amuse yourself until three or four. I have promised to visit my father, who has been much chagrined by the heavy loss he sustained through that same Mr. Preston whose conduct was so distressing to yourself. I shall not therefore propose to take you with me to-day, but on another occasion shall be proud and happy to introduce you to Mr. Armytage."

Zoe set out on her visit, and Christina remained alone in the drawing-room. She practised on the splendid pianoforte, and finding that the instrument was a magnificent one, she derived a species of enthusiastic inspiration from the flow of that harmony which she could thus modulate to grandeur or to pathos beneath her delicate fingers. She sang beautifully, and had a sweet, melodious voice, so that having tested the capacities of the instrument, she presently began to accompany herself in some air.

But scarcely had she commenced the song, when Lord Octavian Meredith reached the drawing-room door. Those strains floated on his ears, he recognized Christina's voice, he stopped to listen. Himself passionately fond of music, it was with a growing rapture that he thus drank in those delicious sounds, in which the most exquisite vocal and instrumental harmonies were blended. His rapture amounted almost to an ecstasy, his pulses thrilled with delight; it appeared as if he had been suddenly borne to the very threshold of Elysium itself. Noiselessly he turned the handle of the door, as gently and cautiously did he open it, and as he looked in, he beheld Christina seated at the piano, her back toward him. She, totally unconscious of his presence, totally unsuspicious of the opening of the door, continued her music and her delicious warbling, all the ecstatic effects of which were enhanced in Lord Octavian's estimation now that he was enabled to contemplate her sylphid figure as she was seated there. Her raven tresses were floating over her shoulders; every now and then he caught a vanishing glimpse of her faultless Grecian profile; every gesture and movement on her part seemed characterized by grace and elegance, and fairer than the piano's ivory keys themselves were the delicate hands that passed over them. Now did those sweetly tapered fingers appear to skip as it were with almost lightning celerity from note to note; now they rested for a few seconds on some particular keys, while the voice of song continued to blend in ravishing harmony with the music which those fingers made. And that shape, too, — how beautifully modelled was it. Even if he had never seen her countenance before, Meredith could have staked his existence that the loveliest face must belong to so charming a figure. The song ceased, the last sounds of the music were vibrating tremulously through the apartment as Octavian closed the door, and Christina started up from her seat.

"Mr. Percival," she exclaimed, her first feeling being one of grateful joy, though mingled with surprise thus to encounter the chivalrous individual who had perilled his life in a duel for her sake.

Octavian advanced, took her hand, and as he pressed it warmly, the rapture of his feelings continued to permeate the looks with which he gazed upon Christina. There was nothing insolent in those regards, no libertine effrontery to shock her pure mind, but nevertheless a degree of fervid admiration which she could not possibly help observing, and which made her withdraw her hand somewhat abruptly as the colour mounted to her cheeks and her eyes were cast down.

" Miss Ashton," said Octavian, " you have delighted me with your musical skill, but, may I add, still more with the exquisite beauty of your voice."

This compliment, delivered in tones that were almost as impassioned as Octavian's looks, completed Christina's confusion; the crimson deepened on her cheeks, and her sweet black eyes, which she had for a moment raised again, were as rapidly bent down once more.

" I hope that I have not offended you," said Octavian, in a soft voice; " not for worlds would I do so."

" Oh, I believe you, sir," exclaimed Christina with artless warmth, for it immediately struck her that the man who had rescued her from insult, and had risked his life as the consequence, could not possibly mean himself to insult her. " But frankly speaking," she added, now looking at him with the full ingenuousness of her large clear dark eyes, and she smiled modestly too as she thus spoke, revealing teeth white as Oriental pearls, " I am so little accustomed to be complimented that perhaps I betray too much awkward embarrassment — "

" No, not too much," ejaculated Octavian, and it was on the very tip of his tongue to add, " I adore you as you are. Your very innocence is the greatest of all your charms," but with a sudden effort he held the words back, and taking her hand, conducted her to a seat.

" Neither Lord nor Lady Octavian Meredith is at home," said Christina, little thinking that she was addressing one of those of whom she spoke. " Her ladyship will not return for two hours — "

" But Lord Octavian himself is in the house," observed Meredith.

" I will ring and inquire," said Christina, and she was rising from her seat, when the expression of Meredith's countenance struck her as so peculiar that she stopped short.

"No, Miss Ashton," he said, "you need not make any such inquiry. Pardon me for a little deceit which was practised on you; forgive me — listen to me —"

"Ah!" ejaculated Christina, with a faint shriek, but instantaneously recovering herself, she said, somewhat coldly, "You, then, are Lord Octavian Meredith?"

"I am," he responded. "Pray resume your seat, and suffer me to give you those explanations which are requisite."

Christina hesitated. There was in her mind a vague sense of impropriety in remaining alone with the young nobleman who had deceived her, and yet she felt that it was a duty both to herself and to him to listen to whatsoever he might have to say. She accordingly sat down again, but spoke not a word, and her look was still cold, but with a certain tremulousness in it.

"You will remember, Miss Ashton," proceeded Meredith, speaking in the most respectful tone, and with a corresponding look, for he felt that he had an exceedingly difficult part to perform, — "you will remember that on the day I had the satisfaction of rendering you a trifling service, I penetrated your motives in asking my name. You saw that a duel was probable, nay, more, that it was inevitable, and with the most generous of purposes you intended to give information to a magistrate. But my honour was at stake, and I was bound to meet that antagonist whom circumstances had suddenly raised up. Therefore, to prevent your generous intentions from being carried out, I gave a false name —"

"True," murmured Christina, as all the circumstances flashed vividly back to her mind.

"That duel," continued Meredith, "took place, as you are aware, but as no injury was the result, it was so completely hushed up that it never reached Lady Octavian's ears. I trust to your generosity that it shall continue a secret in respect to her. But to continue my explanations. I promised you, Miss Ashton, that you should be made acquainted with the result of that duel, that if I fell, my second should wait upon you with the intelligence, but that if I escaped unhurt, I would personally call to convince you of my safety. I did call — I sent up the name by which you already knew me; it was, however, my intention to reveal myself fully to your knowledge. But when I beheld the simple tastes and pursuits of your brother and yourself — pardon me for thus speaking — I thought that the frank and affable manner in which I was received, and the friendly feeling which your brother specially exhibited toward me, might receive a check if I proclaimed myself to be of titled rank. In my estimation that rank is nothing, but I know full well that as the world goes, as society is constituted, and as prejudices have their influence, an aristocratic name has a certain prestige — In a word, I saw enough of you both to wish to become your friend, and I feared that as Lord Octavian Meredith I might not experience the same frank and open-hearted reception which was already given to Mr. Percival."

Meredith ceased, but Christina did not immediately answer him. As a matter of course the explanation was entirely satisfactory up to the point where it treated of the visit to the lodgings after the duel, but from that point to the end it was less satisfactory. Miss Ashton was too artless, ingenuous, and unsophisticated herself, to penetrate the subtleties of the human soul, but on the other hand, she was too intelligent and right-minded not to entertain a certain misgiving as to the young nobleman's complete self-exculpation. A vague idea that the latter portion of his speech had some sophistry in it floated in her imagination, but yet she could scarcely explain the feeling to herself, from the simple reason that she could not possibly suppose Meredith to have been smitten with her beauty.

"My lord," she at length said, speaking gravely and seriously, "I thank you for the explanations which you have given me, but I do not see how it is possible for me to withhold from her ladyship the circumstance that we have met before."

"You have not as yet uttered a word to Zoe about that duel?" inquired Octavian, hastily. "I know you did not yesterday, but to-day?"

"I have never spoken of it to a soul except my brother," responded Christina. "But I really cannot comprehend, my lord, wherefore you should object to her ladyship becoming acquainted with a generous deed which you performed. The danger, thank Heaven! has long been over —"

"Miss Ashton," interrupted Meredith, "your own good sense will tell you that it can be no welcome intelligence for a wife to learn that her husband has for more than two months treasured up a secret from her. Proclaim the truth, if you will, to Zoe, but pardon me for saying that you will be guilty of an act of unkindness toward myself, inasmuch as my wife would never put confidence in me again. If I happened to rise at an earlier hour than usual in the morning, or if I were detained out later than is my wont at night, she would torture herself with all possible anxieties; she would picture to herself her husband involved in some cruel dilemma the imminence of which he had carefully concealed from her — "

" Yes, my lord," interrupted Christina, " all that you say is but too true. Nevertheless, I feel that I cannot be guilty of a deception toward an amiable lady who has received me in the kindest manner — No, I cannot! I will say nothing of past events, but I will withdraw from the house at once. Yes, whatsoever construction may be put on this step — "

" Miss Ashton," exclaimed Octavian Meredith, " I would rather ten thousand times that you should tell Zoe everything. What could she possibly think if you withdrew yourself thus abruptly? She would either imagine that you had received some insult from me, and were too generous to mention it, or on the other hand that you were conscious of some unworthiness of your own which you were afraid of transpiring. Against the former suspicion how could I possibly vindicate myself when all appearances would be in my disfavour? and as for the latter suspicion, sooner than that you should suffer one tittle in the estimation of Zoe, I would proclaim everything."

Christina beheld all the truth and none of the sophistry — for there was a blending of both — contained in these arguments. She was bewildered how to act. Not for the world would she bring mischief into a house the lady of which had received her with open arms, but on the other hand she could not bear the idea of harbouring a secret which to her pure mind savoured so much of a deception.

" Now, Miss Ashton, you must decide upon the course which you intend to pursue," resumed Lord Octavian, and it was with the greatest difficulty he could conceal the anxiety and suspense which he experienced. " There are but two alternatives for your choice: the one is that her ladyship shall be made acquainted with everything, and her confidence in me be thereby destroyed, or that she shall remain in total ignorance of the past, and her happiness continue undisturbed."

"If those be the alternatives, my lord," responded Christina, "I cannot for another moment hesitate between them. It shall be as you wish."

"Thank you, Miss Ashton," answered Meredith, but he was now so completely on his guard that he did not suffer his looks to betray the joy that he felt at the decision to which the beautiful Christina had just come; nor did he speak in tones, nor bend such looks upon her, which might again cover her with confusion, and perhaps engender in her mind a suspicion of the love with which she had inspired him, but of the existence of which she was as yet evidently altogether ignorant.

Scarcely was this understanding arrived at, and just as Christina was about to rise from her seat and retire to her own apartment, the door was thrown open, and the footman announced the Duke of Marchmont.

"My dear Meredith," said his Grace, advancing into the room with a well-bred air of easy familiarity, "it is an age since we met."

His quick eye had at once caught sight of Christina; at once, too, had he recognized in her the sister of his young secretary, by the similitude existing between them, but he preserved the completest control over his looks, — at first affecting not to perceive her at all, and then bowing with the air of a man who has nothing peculiar in his mind when in the presence of some one whom he sees for the first time.

"Permit me, my lord," said Meredith, "to introduce you to Miss Ashton, a friend of Lady Octavian's."

"Delighted to have the honour of Miss Ashton's acquaintance," said the duke, again bowing, and then for the first time appearing to be struck by anything in reference to her, he ejaculated, "Dear me, how strange. I have a young gentleman with me, bearing the same name, and — pardon the observation — but the resemblance is so striking."

"And no wonder, my lord," exclaimed Meredith, with a good-humoured air, "for the young gentleman to whom you allude is this young lady's brother."

" I am more than ever glad to form Miss Ashton's acquaintance," said the duke, with another courteous bow, " for I have taken a very great fancy to young Mr. Ashton, and I am sure that he and I shall be excellent friends. We have not had above a dozen words of conversation this morning, — indeed he has only been a few hours at Marchmont House, — and therefore I had no opportunity of learning from his lips that his sister was here. The pleasure of meeting Miss Ashton is therefore all the greater, on account of being so completely unexpected."

The Duke of Marchmont had been telling a great falsehood. He had learned from Christian where his sister was now located, and in his anxiety to behold that being who he felt persuaded was Octavian's " fair unknown " of some little time past, he had paid the present visit. He did not remain above a quarter of an hour, and neither by look nor word did he suffer Octavian to perceive that he had fathomed the secret, and that in Christina he felt convinced he did behold that fair unknown. As for Miss Ashton herself, she was about to leave the room at the expiration of a few minutes, but both Meredith and Marchmont assured her that they had no private business to converse upon, and for courtesy's sake she was compelled to remain. When however the duke had taken his leave, she at once ascended to her own chamber, where she tarried until Lady Octavian returned from her father's house. Then she reappeared in the drawing-room, and to her great relief found that Meredith was not there. He did not reënter the dwelling until a quarter of an hour before dinner-time, when Zoe was in her own chamber, preparing her evening toilet. Christina had therefore ample leisure to throw off any embarrassment which Lord Octavian's presence occasioned her before Zoe joined them in the drawing-room, and her ladyship saw nothing in the countenance of either to lead her to suspect that they had met before this day.

CHAPTER XXII

CHRISTIAN'S FIRST DAY AT MARCHMONT HOUSE

HAVING thus seen Christina Ashton installed in the situation which she had accepted, let us follow her brother to the mansion of the Duke and Duchess of Marchmont. On arriving there, he was requested by a footman to follow him to the housekeeper's room, and in a few minutes he was introduced to that important female functionary.

We may here as well observe that the steward and housekeeper were husband and wife, and that their name was Calvert. They were an elderly couple, — Mr. Calvert of spare figure, sedate countenance, and remarkable precision both of speech and manners; his wife a stout, matronly, comfortable-looking dame, always exceedingly neat in her apparel, and priding herself highly on the regularity and good discipline which her husband and herself maintained in the domestic department of the household. They were excessively strict, but at the same time straightforward and right-principled. They exercised no overbearing despotism themselves, and allowed no petty tyrannies to be practised by the superior servants toward the inferior ones. They had their own parlour, where they usually took their meals together; but of a Sunday they generally invited the butler, the lady's-maids, and one or two of the upper servants — such as his Grace's valets — to feast at their dining-table.

It was to this comfortable little parlour that Christian Ashton was conducted by the gorgeously dressed footman, and there he found Mr. and Mrs. Calvert seated together. Both were looking over accounts, and in front of each was a goodly pile of money in bank-notes, gold, and silver. When the footman announced Mr. Ashton, they both desisted from their occupation, and rose to receive the young gentleman. The steward bowed primly, the housekeeper proffered the youth her hand; he was invited to sit down, and then did the explanations commence in respect to the arrangements which had been made for his comfort at Marchmont House.

"I have ordered a nice cheerful little bedchamber to be prepared for you," said Mrs. Calvert, "and I will show you to it presently. His Grace has suggested, if you have no objection, that you should take your meals with us — "

"And we have no objection," interposed Mr. Calvert, in a half-patronizing manner, which was nevertheless both kind and respectful, "for you appear to be a young gentleman whose company will be agreeable to us."

"And I am sure," resumed Mrs. Calvert, "we will do all we can to render you comfortable. One thing we must beg to observe, which is that we are very regular in our meals: breakfast at nine, dinner at two, tea at six, and supper at nine. But of course, if at any time you wish for refreshment, you have only to signify such a desire, and it shall be instantaneously complied with."

"While thanking you for your assurances of making me comfortable," answered Christian, "I can safely promise that I shall conform to your regulations."

"His Grace desired me to tell you," said the steward, after a brief pause, "that you are welcome to use the library as much as you think fit when his Grace is elsewhere; and on those occasions when it suits his lordship to be alone there, you can make our parlour your sitting-room. Or there is a little cabinet near the library, which Mrs. Calvert will show you presently, where you are welcome to sit when you choose to be alone. In short, I have not the slightest doubt you will soon fall into the regular routine of the household, and that you will speedily find yourself at home."

Christian again expressed his thanks for the kind assurances thus given him, and the forethought which had dictated all those suggestions for his comfort and well-being.

"And now," said Mrs. Calvert, "would you like a piece of cake and a glass of wine, or a leetle drop of cherry brandy, for the weather is uncommonly cold," and as the worthy matron thus spoke, she repaired to a cupboard of considerable dimensions, and the shelves of which were crowded with pots of preserves, cakes, biscuits, bottles of wine, spirits, and liqueurs, and all those little luxuries which are invariably to be found in a housekeeper's room in a wealthy mansion.

Christian, however, declined the proffered refreshment, for it was still early in the forenoon, and, moreover, his heart was full at being separated from his beloved sister.

"Well, then, Mr. Ashton," said the dame, "let me show you at once to your quarters, and when you have arranged the contents of your boxes, you can report your arrival to the duke."

Mrs. Calvert accordingly conducted the young secretary up a back staircase to a chamber, which, though on one of the upper stories, was nevertheless a most comfortable little apartment, looking upon a small garden that there was at the back of the mansion. She then led him along a corridor, down the upper flights of the principal staircase, as far as the first floor, and there she showed him the entrance to the picture-gallery, assuring him that he was perfectly welcome to lounge in there and amuse himself whensoever he might think fit. Descending thence into the entrance-hall, Mrs. Calvert conducted Christian to the library, which was on the ground floor, and the windows of which looked upon the garden. It was a spacious apartment, containing handsome mahogany cases, the shelves of which were crowded with elegantly bound volumes, all protected by glass doors. By the side of the library was a little parlour, — a narrow slip indeed, — with one window, also looking on the garden, and this was denominated the cabinet, the free use of which was placed at Christian's disposal.

Having thus far initiated him into the geography of the mansion, Mrs. Calvert returned to her own sitting-room, while Christian ascended to his chamber to unpack his boxes and arrange his clothes in the drawers. He then made himself look as neat as possible, and descending to the entrance-hall, requested a footman to announce his arrival to the duke. In a few minutes Christian was desired to attend his Grace in the library, and thither he accordingly repaired.

"Well," said Marchmont, with a half-smile, "so you made up your mind to come and live in the house?"

"Your Grace was kind enough to leave me to my own choice in the matter," replied the youth; "and having consulted with my sister, I called yesterday afternoon — "

"Yes, yes, your message was delivered to me," said the duke. " You intimated your intention to come and take up your abode here to-day, and you have doubtless already found that arrangements have been made to ensure your comfort? "

" For which I sincerely thank your Grace," rejoined Christian.

" Nothing to thank me for," said Marchmont, carelessly. Then, after a pause, during which he had motioned Christian to take a seat, he observed, as if still in the same careless, indifferent manner, " And what is your sister going to do? Coming to live in the neighbourhood, I suppose, so that you may see each other often? "

" No, my lord," replied Christian. " Fortunately my sister obtained a situation at the very same hour yesterday forenoon that I was so happy as to satisfy your Grace's requirements."

" Ah, indeed, a situation? " said Marchmont. " And what is it? "

"Companion, my lord, to a lady living in Regent's Park."

" An elderly lady, I presume? Perhaps a widow — or an old maid? "

" No, my lord," responded Christian, flattering himself, in the ingenuousness of his mind, that the duke was demonstrating considerable interest, and that of a very kind nature, too, in the affairs of himself and his sister. " Christina has become the companion of a young lady — Lady Octavian Meredith."

The duke could scarcely repress a start at this announcement, for, being convinced in his own mind that Christian's sister was Lord Octavian's fair unknown, it at once struck him that Octavian himself had manœuvred in some way or another to get the young girl beneath his own roof. He even suspected for an instant that there must already be some sort of an understanding between Christian's sister and Octavian Meredith, — an understanding which the young lady had perhaps kept altogether unknown from her artless-minded brother; for it needed but a glance on the part of such a thorough man of the world as the Duke of Marchmont to discern how really unsophisticated his young secretary was.

" And pray," he inquired, " how was your sister fortunate enough to obtain that situation? "

"Through the recommendation of the landlady with whom we lived, my lord, and whose daughter is in service at Lady Octavian Meredith's."

The Duke of Marchmont now felt more and more assured that it was all a concocted arrangement on Meredith's part to get Miss Ashton into his house, and that the landlady just alluded to had lent herself to the scheme, even if Christina herself had not.

"Cunning dog, that Octavian!" he thought to himself; "but perhaps I will outwit him yet." And then he said, speaking aloud, "I am well acquainted with Lord Octavian Meredith. Ah, by the bye, now I bethink me, it was on account of a Miss Ashton that he fought a duel some little time back, and I was his second on the occasion."

"Lord Octavian Meredith!" ejaculated Christian, opening wide his fine dark eyes in bewildered astonishment at this intelligence. "No, my lord, there is some mistake. It was a Mr. Percival."

"Cunning dog, that Octavian!" again thought the duke to himself, for it immediately struck him that the young nobleman had concealed his aristocratic rank under a feigned name, and perhaps represented himself as an unmarried man, the better to carry on a love siege against the heart of the beautiful Christina. Then again speaking aloud, Marchmont said, "I am afraid I have let out a secret, for it assuredly was Lord Octavian Meredith who fought on your sister's behalf. About twenty-two or twenty-three years of age, very good-looking, slender shape, brown hair and moustache — "

"The same, my lord!" cried Christian, more and more bewildered.

"Don't look so astonished," said the duke, smiling. "It is perfectly intelligible that Lord Octavian should have taken a feigned name. By the bye, I recollect that he told me so, and that his reason was the fear that your sister would go and take steps to prevent the duel. But I suppose he called upon you afterward?"

"Once, my lord, and only once," responded Christian.

"And you were present?"

"The whole time. He only remained a short while, and that very same evening we removed to other lodgings. We never saw Lord Octavian again. What a singular coincidence that my sister should have obtained a situation with his lordship's wife!"

"Very singular," observed the duke, convinced that the lad was speaking in the genuine sincerity of his unsophisticated heart.

A little more conversation took place, and by means of farther questioning, but all conducted in such a way as to prevent Christian from suspecting that the duke had any ulterior object in view, his Grace obtained a sufficient insight into the character of Christina and the recent mode of life of the twins as to bring him to the conclusion that Miss Ashton was really a most virtuous and well-conducted girl, and that it was through no secret understanding on her own part that she had entered Lord Octavian's household. On the contrary, Marchmont felt convinced that up to the very moment of her proceeding thither, she had no idea of the identity of Lord Octavian and Mr. Percival.

"Should you happen to fall in with Lord Octavian," said the duke, "you had better not tell him that it was from my lips you learned the little secret that the name of Percival was an assumed one. Of course your sister will tell you, and you need not appear to have known it in any other way."

"Certainly, my lord, your advice shall be followed," answered Christian, who saw no harm and suspected no evil in all these things.

"We have no letters to write to-day," remarked the duke, presently, "and therefore you may amuse yourself in becoming better acquainted with your new home."

With these words the duke rose and sauntered out of the library, fully determined to call in the course of the afternoon at Lord Octavian Meredith's, and obtain a glimpse, if possible, of the beautiful Miss Ashton. That this design was carried into effect the reader has already seen, and the result of the interview was that the Duke of Marchmont felt himself as much enamoured of the charming girl as such a dissipated individual could possibly be.

While ascending to his own chamber in the course of the afternoon, Christian encountered on the stairs a beautiful lady, attended by a maid, and whom he at once conceived to be the duchess. She was in her thirty-second year, tall, finely formed, and with lustrous masses of auburn hair floating over her shoulders. There was something more than beautiful in her countenance, — a touching pensiveness bordering upon melancholy, which rendered her eminently interesting; and as Christian stood respectfully aside to make way for her, and bowed courteously as he did so, she stopped and spoke.

" Are you the young gentleman," she inquired, in a soft, musical voice, and with her benignant look, " whom his Grace has engaged as his private secretary? "

Christian bowed again, and replied in the affirmative.

" I hope you will be happy and comfortable at Marchmont House," proceeded her ladyship; and then, with an ill-subdued sigh, she continued her way down the stairs.

In the evening, after supper, as Christian was amusing himself in the library, looking at some of the elegantly bound books, and making notes of the titles of those which he thought he should like to peruse at his leisure, he happened to take down a volume from between the leaves of which a piece of paper fell upon the carpet. He picked it up, and found that it was a column cut out of an old newspaper. It was dingy with age, though the print was perfectly legible; and the date at the top showed him that the journal of which it had once formed a part belonged to a period of more than eighteen years back. Christian was about to return the slip to the book from which it had fallen, when his eye caught the name of Marchmont, and a closer scrutiny showed him that it was a report of a coroner's inquest upon the body of a murdered duke bearing that title. Naturally interested in the circumstance, from being in the service of the present duke, Christian sat down to read the account; and thus for the first time did he become acquainted with some of those facts which have been related in the earlier chapters of our narrative. He thereby discovered that the present Duke of Marchmont had succeeded to the title of his murdered uncle, that the murder itself had been brought home by unquestionable evidence to the existing duke's brother, the Honourable Mr. Bertram Vivian, and that there was an equal amount of evidence to prove a criminal intercourse between Bertram Vivian and the wife of the murdered duke. The young lad shuddered as he read the catalogue of iniquities thus circumstantially narrated.

Replacing the newspaper fragment between the leaves of the book, and returning the book to the shelf, Christian sat down to ponder over all he had just read. He thought to himself what a kind-hearted man the present duke must be to have endeavoured to shield his brother from the dreadful imputation which rested against him at the time; for that Hugh had made such endeavour was duly recorded in the proceedings of the inquest. While Christian was thus giving way to his reflections, wondering too what had ultimately become of Bertram and Eliza, an imperceptible drowsiness stole over him, — a drowsiness which blended, as it were, with his reverie, imparting a dreaminess to the tenor of his thoughts. If he had been reading at the time, he would no doubt have endeavoured to shake it off; but as he was reclining back in a cushioned armchair, with no occupation for his eyes, but, on the contrary, his outward vision being turned inwardly, so to speak, in the contemplation of the incidents of the past, he made no attempt to struggle against that insidiously stealing drowsiness. It deepened, and in a few minutes the youth was wrapped in profound slumber. That sleep should thus have come over him was scarcely to be wondered at, for on the previous day as well as on that of which we are writing he had undergone considerable excitement of the mind on account of the change which had taken place in the condition of his sister and himself. However, be the cause whatsoever it might, Christian slumbered in that large armchair, and this occurred a little after ten o'clock in the evening.

How long he slept he could not immediately tell, but he gradually wakened up to the knowledge that the place was involved in pitchy darkness, and that voices were speaking there. His first sensation was one of physical cold, blended with mental alarm. Lamp and fire had both gone out, hence the chill which he naturally experienced in his limbs; and his alarm was occasioned by the fact that he could not immediately recollect where he was. This dimness and bewilderment of the mind's perception was, however, transient, and at the very instant that he remembered how he had fallen asleep in the Duke of Marchmont's library, he recognized the voice of the duke himself.

"What nonsense! Are you afraid to be in the dark? I tell you there is no one here. It is impossible. Why, man, it is past midnight, and all the household are in bed, except the hall porter who let us in, and my valet, whom, as you heard, I ordered to retire at once. We have but a few words to say, and may as well say them here as anywhere else."

"Afraid, my lord?" said the other voice, and which was totally unfamiliar to Christian's ears. "What can I be afraid of? But your Grace will confess that it is a somewhat strange proceeding to drag a man almost by force into a dark room, shut the door, and then tell him that it is on a most important business — "

The Duke of Marchmont interrupted the speaker with a loud laugh, exclaiming, "Why, my dear Stanhope, a man who was brave enough to go out and fight a duel cannot care for being a little while in the dark!"

"And I tell your Grace that I do not," replied the individual, who, it appeared, was Mr. Stanhope. "But still — "

"But still — but still — you do not much relish it?" continued the duke, laughing, and yet there was something curiously unnatural and forced in that laugh of his.

"You opened another door," said Mr. Stanhope, "ere you brought me in hither? Pray speak seriously."

"Well, I will," rejoined the duke. "Now, the fact is, my dear fellow, the door that I opened first of all was that of a little cabinet where the servants are accustomed to leave a light, together with wine and spirits and so forth, when I come in very late at night; but, as you yourself saw, there was no light there. Sometimes the light and the refreshments are placed here, in the library, and that was the reason I led you from one door to another. But, however, there is no light here any more than there is in the cabinet, and as we are here, we may as well talk. Candidly speaking, I have something important to say, and don't want to go up into the drawing-room because that valet of mine may not have retired to bed as yet, and I would not have him overhear our discourse."

"But may it not be also possible, my lord," inquired Stanhope, "that we shall be overheard here?"

"No, for the inner green-baize door hermetically seals the entrance against eavesdroppers. Now, Stanhope, are you prepared to hear me?"

"I am, my lord. Go on."

"You have this night lost twelve thousand pounds to me at the gaming-table," continued the Duke of Marchmont, speaking with a certain tone of resoluteness, as if he felt himself to be in the position of one who could dictate and command.

" And I have frankly told your Grace," replied Stanhope, " that I have not twelve thousand shillings at this present moment."

" True," remarked the duke, curtly. " You admit, therefore, that you are in my power? "

" So completely in your Grace's power that if you expose me to the world, I have no alternative but to place the muzzle of a pistol in my mouth and pull the trigger valiantly, or else take a drop of prussic acid and yield up my life as if it were a lightning-flash passing out of me," and it was in a singular but horrible tone of mingled irony and desperation that the Honourable Mr. Stanhope thus spoke.

" I have given you to understand," replied the duke, " that to neither of these agreeable alternatives need you have recourse, provided — "

" Ah, — provided! " ejaculated Stanhope. " Then there is a condition — a condition beyond the mere one of giving your Grace some security for eventual payment? But, my lord, is it possible that this condition is of such a character that you dare not look me in the face while explaining it, and that for this reason you have brought me into a room where the darkness is as deep as that of the grave? "

" Would you have me give you credit for being overnice and particular? " asked the duke, in a somewhat sneering tone. " Now, look you, Mr. Stanhope, you and I have not known each other for much more than a couple of months or so, — ten weeks, at the very outside. It was the duel which first rendered us acquainted — "

" It was, my lord. Go on."

" During these ten weeks if indeed our acquaintance has been so long —I have seen quite enough of you, and have learned perhaps still more — "

" I can anticipate what your Grace would say," interrupted Stanhope, coldly, yet somewhat bitterly. " You know that I am a gambler, and that already an almost princely fortune has gone into the hands of a set of harpies — Maledictions upon them! the bare thought of it is enough to make a man forswear cards and dice for evermore. You know, too, that I am dissipated, fond of pleasure, having a certain position in society which it were death to lose, having also a certain appearance to keep up, to fail in which were to carry me at once to the necessity of suicide. Well, my lord, all these things you know, and, what is more still, you feel that my cursed ill luck of the last three hours has left me entirely at your mercy. Judging of my habits, and taking my desperate condition into account, you regard me as a suitable instrument for some purpose you have in hand. Is it not so?"

"It is," responded the Duke of Marchmont.

"Then your lordship might have said so at first, without any unnecessary circumlocution; and you might likewise say so within the sphere of a lamp's light and over a glass of wine."

"Not so," rejoined the duke. "As we are here in the dark, so will we remain until our conference be ended. As for the wine, it all depends upon the understanding to which we come whether we adjourn to the dining-room and empty a decanter ere we part — "

"It may be as well if I inform your Grace at once that I am not exceedingly particular in what I do to save myself from ruin. A man," continued Mr. Stanhope, "who has found himself compelled to contemplate suicide, and to talk of it, is not likely to stick at a trifle or two if it will enable him to live. To live — yes, but in his usual manner, I mean, with gold at his command, the means of pleasure at his bidding — "

"And all these shall be within your reach," interrupted Marchmont. "Now, look you, my dear fellow, — for circumstances are rendering you and me closely intimate. Indeed, I wish you to become intimate with me, I wish you to call at the house every day, to dine with me three or four times a week; and for that purpose I will dine at home on the occasions when you are coming. I wish you to call in the afternoon and lounge in the drawing-room in conversation with the duchess, I wish you to pay your court to her, to make yourself agreeable to her Grace, to pass around to her box when she is at the theatre or at the opera — "

"And what in the devil's name," cried Stanhope, with accents of unfeigned amazement, "does your Grace purpose by all this?"

"You owe me twelve thousand pounds, which you cannot pay," responded the duke, "and I have no doubt that it would be an agreeable thing if this twelve thousand pounds were not merely forgiven you, but that a like sum were handed over to you as a testimonial of my esteem — all private, secret, and confidential, you know, and entirely between ourselves."

"It must be a tremendous service which your Grace demands for such a colossal reward," and Stanhope spoke gravely and seriously.

"It is an immense service which you will be rendering me," replied the duke, "but one which you can perform with few scruples of conscience; while, on the other hand, there is great *éclat* to be obtained thereby."

"I am as completely in the dark with respect to your Grace's meaning," said Mr. Stanhope, "as I am in the place where we are now talking. Can you not come to the point? Frankly speaking, I infinitely dislike this roundabout manner which your Grace is adopting — "

"Then, in a few words," interrupted the duke, "I will explain myself. You are to become intimate with me, you are to pay your court, as I have already said, to the duchess, you will be a constant visitor here, you will literally besiege her Grace. Then the world will begin to talk. No matter! I shall see nothing that is going on, and if the world choose to consider me blind, be it so. But at length I shall awaken all of a sudden, something will occur to fill me with suspicion — an intercepted letter, for instance, — a letter, you comprehend, from yourself to her Grace, — in which you will speak of the love subsisting between you. Ay, and you will even go farther, you will leave no doubt as to the criminal nature of that love — "

"But suppose that nothing of all this does really take place," interrupted Stanhope. "Suppose that her Grace conceives a hatred for me?"

"And very likely she will," observed the duke, coolly, "but what has that got to do with your incessant visits, and with the letter which in a few months' time you will write and which you will take care that I shall intercept? May I not play the part of a dishonoured and outraged husband? Will not you stand the brunt of an action for crim. con., when you know perfectly well that I shall never call upon you to pay such damages as may be awarded? And may I not, upon such foundation as the jury's verdict affords, sue for a divorce against a woman whom I hate and detest? May not, I ask, all these things take place, and if you get as good as twenty-four thousand pounds for rendering me this service, will not you be a gainer as well as I? Besides, only think of the honour and credit of having the reputation of intriguing with a duchess! Why, my good fellow, it will make your fortune in more ways than one, it will be to you better than all that fortune which you have lost at the gambling-table. The whole fashionable world will at once vote you their lion, their star, their phœnix, their cynosure. The men will burst with envy and with jealousy, when with a half-smile upon your countenance you stroll jauntily into the brilliant saloons of patrician mansions; the ladies will tap you with their fans and call you the naughty creature — "

"A truce to this bantering!" interrupted Stanhope, sharply, almost sternly. "It is true that I am in your Grace's power, but I am not for that reason to be rendered your laughing-stock. It is impossible that you can mean what you say."

"I never was more serious in my life," answered the Duke of Marchmont.

"By Heaven, my lord, it is a matter wherein I cannot give you credit for the seriousness you speak of, unless you prove it. How know I but that it is some snare, though incomprehensible, some pitfall, though unaccountable, wherein you seek to entrap me? And this dark room, too — "

"Perdition take your constant recurrence to the darkness of the room!" interrupted the duke, impatiently. "You demand proof? It is difficult to give. And yet in many circumstances may you recognize such proof. For upwards of fifteen years have I been married to Lavinia, and she has given me no heir. Think you that I, bearing one of the proudest titles in all Christendom, and that title, too, associated with immense wealth, think you, I ask, that I do not yearn to possess an heir to my distinctions and to my riches? The estates are strictly entailed; think you, therefore, that it is a pleasurable thing for me to reflect that at my death some far-removed relative, some remote connection whose very existence is at present unknown to me, may spring up, possibly from amidst the dregs of society, for the highest families may be found to have connections, though very distant ones, in the lowest sphere, — think you, I ask, that it is agreeable for me to reflect that some such dirty claimant may arise when I am gone and prove his right to the coronet which I wear, the estates over which I now lord it, and the mansions which my taste has embellished? Now, Stanhope, have I given proofs of my sincerity in seeking a divorce from her who presents me with no heir?"

There was a profound silence in the library for upwards of a minute, at the expiration of which Mr. Stanhope slowly said, "Yes, I now believe your Grace to be sincere."

"Oh, it is well that I have succeeded in convincing you at last," observed the duke.

"I believe you sincere in wishing for an heir," continued Stanhope, "but in the extreme measure which your Grace proposes — "

"That regards me," interrupted the duke. "It is for you to consider whether you will enter into my project, and carry it out in the way that I have suggested, or with such variations as circumstances may render advisable, always keeping the one grand aim in view."

"I will!" answered Stanhope. "Yes, my necessities compel me, I will do it."

"Then there is no more to be said at present," observed the duke. "There is a light in the hall, we will repair to the dining-room. I cannot promise you a fire — "

"My blood," interrupted Stanhope, "has not yet cooled down from the terrific fever-heat produced by the excitement of the gaming-table. Let us have the bottle of wine; the fire may be dispensed with."

"Come," answered the duke, "we will have the wine."

Christian then heard the double doors of the library open; the light from the hall gleamed in for a moment, and showed him the two forms as they passed the threshold. Then the doors were closed again, and again was the youth entombed in utter darkness.

But let us explain how it was that he had continued so silent and so still throughout this discourse which he had overheard. When first he became aware that voices were speaking in the library, he was seized, as we have stated, with a certain degree of alarm, and this he could not all in a moment shake off. Called out of his sleep in such a manner, finding himself in the dark, not immediately recollecting where he was, and hearing those voices, he thought he must be in a dream; and the terror which he felt, as well as the numbing cold, completely paralzyed him. When his consciousness became complete, he learned from the duke's words that it was long past midnight, and that the household had retired to rest. The thought instantaneously struck him that if he were found there, sitting up at such an hour, he should be chided, perhaps dismissed from the situation which he had only entered in the morning. This idea appalled him, he was bewildered how to act, and while in this terrible state of uncertainty, not daring to move, scarcely to breathe, the conversation progressed rapidly between the duke and Mr. Stanhope. As the reader has seen, it soon became of a nature which the duke would not for the world have had anybody overhear, and thus Christian saw that his position was becoming every instant more and more difficult. When the discourse had got to a certain extent, he dared not suddenly raise his voice and proclaim that there was a listener present. The natural question would be, wherefore he had remained to listen at all? So he continued motionless and silent, in the hope that the duke and his companion would speedily pass away from the library. But as the discourse progressed, it assumed a complexion so astounding, so startling indeed, if Christian had dared to start at all, it grew so engrossing in its terrible interest, that, forgetting every other circumstance, he drank in the whole with his amazed sense of hearing. Thus did he tarry there until the end, and even after the double doors had closed behind the duke and Mr. Stanhope, it was a long time ere Christian could venture to draw a breath freely.

Good heavens, what a tale had he heard! What a diabolical conspiracy had become revealed to his knowledge! In what a fearful light was the character of his employer suddenly presented to his comprehension! But was it not natural that the youth should say to himself, "It is Providence that placed me here on this occasion, to learn the deeply plotted scheme of villainy, and to become the divine instrument in frustrating it."

His first impulse was now to rush to the dining-room, proclaim to the two conspirators that their horrible machinations had come to his knowledge, rush forth in disgust from the house, and on the morrow reveal everything to a magistrate, or to the relatives of the duchess, if he could find out who they were. This, we say, was his first impulse; and he was starting from his seat to obey it, when a thought struck him, and he sat down again. If he were to carry out such a plan, would it succeed, should he be believed, would not the duke and Stanhope indignantly deny the imputation and denounce it as the raving of a madman or the odious calumny of a miserable impostor? And would not the world give its faith to the bold denial of those two men of high social position rather than to the unsupported testimony of an obscure individual? Might not such conduct on Christian's part be even attributed to a vindictive feeling toward the man who had recently insulted his sister? All these considerations induced Christian to pause. Then, what course should he pursue? His mind was far too unsettled, his thoughts were too much excited, to allow him to come to any conclusion on the present occasion. He accordingly stole forth from the library, groped his way along a passage to the back staircase, and succeeded in reaching his chamber without disturbing any one.

We should here observe that when the household had retired to rest, Mr. and Mrs. Calvert fancied that the young secretary had already sought his own room, little dreaming that he had fallen asleep in the library and was continuing to slumber there while lamp and fire went out.

CHAPTER XXIII

AN ADVISER

Christian awoke after a few hours of troubled repose, and it was still dusk on that cold wintry morning. He did not therefore immediately get up, but began to arrange all his confused ideas, so as to convince himself that what was uppermost in his thoughts was not merely the recollection of a dream. His convictions told him that it was indeed all too true, and he perceived the necessity of deciding on the course which he should adopt.

For the various reasons which had occurred to him on the preceding night, and which we have detailed at the close of the last chapter, he felt how impossible it was to proclaim to the world all he knew. Yet how could he remain in the employment of a man whom he had thus discovered to be the most black-hearted of villains? On the other hand, if he were to withdraw from the house, how could he serve the duchess and frustrate the satanic plot which was in embryo for her destruction? No, he must remain beneath that roof, for once more did the thought revert to his mind that Heaven itself had willed him to become its own instrument for the salvation of an innocent lady and the confusion of her foes. Should he speak to the duchess upon the subject? No, not for a single moment could he hope or expect that she would believe him. If she had known him for years, it would be different, but he was an utter stranger to her, he had only been in the house a few hours, she had seen him but for a few moments, and it would be the height of madness to expect that she would give credit to a tale so horribly damnatory to her husband's character. He must remain quiet for the present, he must watch the progress of events, and he must act accordingly.

But how could he assume a placid and respectful demeanour in the presence of the duke? How could he maintain a becoming deportment before one whom he now knew to be a detestable miscreant? Christian abominated dissimulation, he was high-minded and well principled, his soul was imbued with the loftiest notions of honour and integrity, he was as truthful, for one of his own sex, as his sister was for a being of the feminine race. And yet if Christian remained at Marchmont House, he must dissimulate, he must to a certain extent play the hypocrite, he must treat the Duke of Marchmont as if he knew nought to his detriment, he must wear a contented, if not a smiling and cheerful countenance, — in a word, he must play a part which he despised, loathed, and abhorred. It was difficult indeed for Christian Ashton to bend himself to this necessity, and yet for the sake of the duchess he resolved to do so. He felt that any sacrifice of feeling must be made on his own part in order to save an innocent lady from the atrocious machinations which had been devised for her destruction.

At about ten o'clock he attended the duke in the library, and his Grace bade him sit down to answer the letters which had come by that morning's post. These were chiefly on business matters from the bailiffs of the duke's provincial estates, from tenants soliciting renewals of leases, or requesting forbearance in respect to arrears of rent, from country gentlemen earnestly begging the duke's interest to procure government situations for their sons or other relatives, and so forth. On the backs of the greater portion of these documents, the duke noted the replies which were to be transmitted, and Christian proceeded to execute his work to the best of his ability. As each responsive letter was finished, he handed it across the table to the Duke of Marchmont, who was evidently well satisfied with the manner in which his young secretary acquitted himself of his duties. Thus nearly two hours were passed, and it was about noon when a footman entered and presented to his Grace a card upon a massive and exquisitely wrought silver salver.

"Ah, Mr. Hyde," said the duke, as he glanced at the card. "I sent for him yesterday. Let him come in."

The footman withdrew, and Christian, thinking that the business might be private, rose from his seat and was about to retire also, but the duke made a motion for him to remain, observing, " There is no necessity for you to leave. On the contrary, I wish you to pay attention to what is about to take place, so that immediately after Mr. Hyde has departed, you may make notes of our conversation. He is a slippery kind of fellow, and I must nail him to his pledges, or else never again shall he represent a pocket-borough of mine." Then, after a brief pause, the duke observed for the information of his secretary, " This Mr. Hyde, you must know, is a Member of Parliament."

The door opened, and the footman announced the visitor in a loud voice. Mr. Fenwick Finnikin Hyde, M.P. for the borough of Viviandale, was a gentleman about forty, of middle height and spare figure, affected in his looks and speech, smirking and obsequious in his manners. He was exquisitely dressed, in a blue surtout coat, a figured silk waistcoat, black pantaloons, and patent leather boots. His cravat was tied in a most unexceptionable manner, a massive gold chain festooned over his waistcoat, and his kid gloves fitted so tightly that he had some difficulty in drawing off the one from the right hand, as with divers bowings and scrapings he extended that same right hand in the evident expectation that it would be taken by the duke, toward whom he advanced with a sort of skipping, mincing gait. He was by no means good-looking, notwithstanding all the pains lavished upon his toilet, the wavy curls of his long dark hair, and the artificial gloss of his whiskers. He was every inch the time-server and the parasite, feeling himself to be dependent upon the breath of the great man to whose presence he was thus summoned, yet endeavouring to carry off the consciousness of his servile condition by a jaunty air of smirking familiarity, which would doubtless impress an inexperienced stranger with the idea that he felt himself to be on a tolerably friendly if not altogether equal footing with his Grace.

But the Duke of Marchmont, bowing distantly, affected not to perceive Fenwick Finnikin Hyde's outstretched hand, and coldly motioned to a seat, which that gentleman, endeavouring to look surprised at this reception, at once took. Then, as he held his well-brushed glossy hat upon his knees, he said, in a weak, affected voice, " Glad to see your Grace looking so well. Never saw your Grace looking better. Quite astonishing, 'pon my honour."

The duke simply inclined his head in acknowledgment of these compliments, and then observed, in a cold, severe voice, " I requested you to call upon me, Mr. Hyde, that you may give some little explanations — "

" Quite right, my lord. Always glad to wait upon your Grace to explain what is going forward in the political world. But — " and he glanced toward Christian.

" This young gentleman is my private secretary," said the duke, " and we may speak in his presence. Indeed, he will not pay any attention to what we may have to say, for, as you perceive, he is busy in answering letters."

" Oh, very good, my lord," exclaimed Mr. Fenwick Finnikin Hyde, bestowing a patronizing smile upon Christian. " Of course, if your Grace has no objection to the young gentleman being present, I can have none. Seen this morning's papers, my lord? Astonishing how they are turning against the Ministry, — astonishing, 'pon my honour."

" And I could wish, Mr. Hyde," said the duke, with a voice and look of severe meaning, " that certain gentlemen belonging to the House of Commons would be equally firm in their opposition to that same most despicable Cabinet. I think, Mr. Hyde, that you addressed your constituents at Viviandale a few days back? "

" Quite right, my lord," exclaimed the honourable gentleman. " Public dinner given to me by the free and independent electors, — exceedingly sorry that your Grace was not in the chair. Astonishing enthusiasm nevertheless, — astonishing, 'pon my honour," and Mr. Fenwick Finnikin Hyde caressed his whiskers with an assumed look of complaisance, though a very close observer might have seen that he was sitting somewhat uneasily on his chair, like a schoolboy who has committed a fault, and being summoned into the presence of his master is dreading the moment when he will be charged therewith.

" Yes, Mr. Hyde," resumed Marchmont, still speaking severely, " you did attend a public dinner at Viviandale, — a dinner, sir, at which there were one hundred and thirty-three electors present, — being the Tory majority of the two hundred and nine freemen of the borough. And that Tory majority as a matter of course looks to me as the lord and master of their opinions, their consciences, and their souls. There is no mistake about the matter, Mr. Hyde;

the borough is mine, and no gentleman can continue to represent it if once he forfeits my confidence."

"Quite right, my lord, certainly not," ejaculated the Member for Viviandale, and then he smiled with a forced complacency, as if he meant it to be inferred that he had not by any means forfeited his ducal patron's confidence.

"If you consider that I am right, Mr. Hyde," proceeded Marchmont, "you will not be astonished if I frankly intimate that unless your conduct undergoes a change, you will at the next general election cease to be the representative of Viviandale. There were passages in your speech, sir, which unmistakably indicated a tendency toward what is generally known as ratting — "

"Astonishing, quite astonishing, 'pon my honour," cried the honourable gentleman, holding up his hands in amazement. "Really, my lord, if your Grace had only heard the cheers which my speech elicited — "

"I care nothing for the cheers, sir," interrupted Marchmont, haughtily. "There may perhaps be some few of my tenant farmers as well as of the tradesmen of Viviandale who are infected with revolutionary notions, and who in their hearts rebel against my authority. They may therefore cheer, sir, what are called liberal sentiments, although they dare not fly in my face and give their votes in the same sense. But I tell you that I care nothing for the cheers so long as the votes are always of the right sort. Your speech, Mr. Hyde, savoured of treachery, and there is positively a rumour afloat — I must speak out plainly — that you have sold yourself to the Whigs."

"Astonishing, quite astonishing, 'pon my honour," ejaculated the honourable gentleman. "Really, my lord, I am surprised that your Grace should give credit to such rumours."

"Take care that they do not prove true, Mr. Hyde. Remember the understanding on which you were first brought in for Viviandale, the conditions on which I paid your electioneering expenses, the terms on which for three Parliaments you have represented my borough. By Heaven, sir, if you deceive me, you shall be turned out next time, and I will put in my steward or my butler, — ay, or even one of my footmen, rather than stand the chance of being turned around upon. You solemnly pledged yourself to stand by Church and State in all things, to denounce the pecple generally as a base, ignorant mob, to hold up the working classes in particular as an unwashed rabble, to oppose everything in the shape of progress, to support all aristocratic privileges, — in a word, to conduct yourself as a staunch Tory in all questions where there could be no doubt as to the course you were to pursue, while in all dubious matters you were to vote precisely according to my dictation. Now, Mr. Hyde, during the last session you did not act up entirely to these pledges, but I then said nothing on the subject. Your recent speech at Viviandale has, however, enhanced my misgivings, and the rumours which are afloat almost seem to confirm them. What am I to understand, sir? And what am I to expect?"

"Understand, my lord, nothing against me. Expect, my lord, that I shall serve your Grace in all things. But the fact is," continued Mr. Fenwick Finnikin Hyde, with a smile half-blandly complacent and half-smirkingly sycophantic, "a man must now and then make a show of independence — "

"Stuff and nonsense," exclaimed the duke, indignantly. "The borough of Viviandale is my own, as well as those of Rottentown and Mongerville, and depend upon it I shall do as I like with my own. Independence, indeed; it is ridiculous. The five seats which those boroughs have in the House of Commons are mine, and I mean that the occupants of them shall do my bidding. What will become of our blessed Constitution if the proprietors of pocket-boroughs were to allow independence? No such thing, sir. But the fact is you have been coquetting with the Whigs, you have been endeavouring to sell yourself, they would not buy you at your own price, and now you wish to get back into my favour. Pledge yourself, that henceforth you will fulfil your compacts and I will pardon you."

"Your Grace is really too hard upon me," said Mr. Hyde, simpering and smiling, but unable to prevent himself from looking foolish. "It is astonishing how false rumours do get about, — astonishing, 'pon my honour. However, as your Grace proposes to stretch forth the hand of friendship, pray suffer me to take it."

"And at the opening of the session," observed Marchmont, "you will take the earliest opportunity to make such a speech as shall neutralize the evil effect of the one you delivered the other day to my voters at Viviandale?"

"Oh, certainly, my lord," cried the honourable gentleman. "I will make a speech that shall put matters all to rights, 'pon my honour."

"And I, Mr. Hyde, shall send you in good time a few strong sentences which you will take care to deliver against the Ministry. When I have leisure I will write down what I think you ought to say on the occasion — "

"Pray do so, my lord; I shall be delighted to profit by your Grace's inspirations. It is astonishing how keen is your Grace's perception, how shrewd your Grace's judgment in respect to the leading topics of the day, — astonishing, 'pon my honour."

Hereupon Mr. Fenwick Finnikin Hyde rose from his seat; the duke's hand was now stretched out to him, the honourable gentleman pressed it with every appearance of enthusiastic devotion, and obsequiously bowed himself out.

"You will note down the heads of this conversation," said the Duke of Marchmont to Christian, when the door had closed behind the Member for Viviandale. "I am now going out, and when you have taken the notes I speak of, the remainder of the day is at your own disposal."

With these words the Duke of Marchmont quitted the library, leaving Christian in a state of no ordinary amazement at the scene which he had just witnessed. He had hitherto fancied that Great Britain was the freest country on the face of the earth, and that the House of Commons was composed of an independent set of men, honestly, fairly, and impartially representing the whole people. He had now learned a lesson to the contrary, and he was astonished at the corruption of the system which allowed the Duke of Marchmont the control of those boroughs, enabling him to bestow them upon his own creatures. Not less was Christian surprised and disgusted at the abject servility with which one of those creatures had just abnegated all political independence, though faintly making a show to the contrary. When the young secretary had committed to paper the notes of the conversation at which he had been present, he issued forth to take a walk, intending to call upon Christina.

He was proceeding through Hyde Park on his way toward Regent's Park, pondering on the character of the Duke of

Marchmont, and in no very comfortable mood reflecting on the scene of the preceding night, when he beheld a tall gentleman approaching. He was enveloped in a cloak, and Christian immediately knew him to be Mr. Redcliffe. The youth was walking slowly in one direction; Redcliffe was advancing as slowly from the other. The latter was evidently absorbed in thought, as was the former. The air was chill; his mantle was closely wrapped around him, the collar reached high up, indeed almost to his cheek-bones, and his hat was drawn somewhat over the upper part of his countenance. He did not at first see Christian, and was about to pass him, but the youth addressed Mr. Redcliffe in courteously becoming terms.

" Ah, I did not perceive you," said this gentleman; " and I am glad you spoke." At the same time he proffered the youth his hand. " It is a long while since we last met."

" It is nearly ten weeks, sir," replied Christian.

" I recollect," observed Redcliffe. " It was when you and your sister had been performing a generous act of charity toward that poor creature — "

" Whose rapid pathway to the grave was smoothed by your bounties," added Christian, who experienced an illimitable admiration for the character of Mr. Redcliffe.

" And where are you living now? " inquired this gentleman, with his characteristic abruptness. " How is your amiable sister? I have thought of you both sometimes, and indeed have been going to ask Mrs. Macaulay concerning you, but something has always occurred to put it out of my head."

" I am grateful, sir," answered Christian, " to learn that my sister and myself have enjoyed your consideration. Christina is living with Lady Octavian Meredith — "

" Ah, then you no longer dwell together, — you and your sister? " exclaimed Mr. Redcliffe, now surveying the youth with an increasing interest.

" No, sir; circumstances compelled us to separate. We have to earn our own living, but, thank Heaven! my sister is comfortably provided for."

" And you? " asked Redcliffe.

" I am for the present private secretary to the Duke of Marchmont," responded Christian.

" Ah! " ejaculated Mr. Redcliffe, and then he hastily observed, " But why do you speak as if your sister only was comfortably situated, and you were not? Is it because you feel your present position to be a mere temporary one? "

" Yes, sir, for that and another reason — "

But then Christian stopped short, sorry even that he had said so much.

" Has the Duke of Marchmont cause to be dissatisfied with you? Has he given you notice to leave him? "

" Oh, no, sir," exclaimed Christian, speaking with a sort of ardour, in the consciousness that he was giving complete satisfaction to his ducal employer, and that the tenure of his office depended entirely upon himself.

" Perhaps you are dissatisfied with your situation? " said Mr. Redcliffe inquiringly, and Christian perceived that his dark eyes were fixed keenly upon him.

" Frankly speaking, sir," responded the youth, " I am not well pleased with the post which I occupy, and though for a time I may keep it — "

But here again he stopped suddenly short, as the idea flashed to him that possibly Mr. Redcliffe might be acquainted with the duke, in which case it would be the height of imprudence for him (Christian) to enter into any explanations with regard to the point whereon he had begun to touch.

" You need not be afraid to speak frankly and candidly to me," observed Redcliffe, who seemed at once to fathom the motive of the youth's hesitation. " I have not the slightest acquaintance with the Duke of Marchmont, and even if it were otherwise, I should not betray anything that you might in confidence reveal to me. I experience an interest in you, and if you think fit to regard me as a friend, you shall find me deserving of the title. If I remember right I have learned that you and your sister are twins, and that you are orphans; your own words just now gave me to understand that you are both dependent on yourselves for your support. In this case you may need the advice of a friend, even if at the moment you require no more substantial succour, but both should be cheerfully given by me."

Christian expressed his gratitude for these assurances, and he experienced a profound pleasure at thus becoming the object of proffered friendship on the part of one whose character he already so much admired.

"Think not, young gentleman," continued Mr. Redcliffe, "that I am inspired by any impertinent curiosity in seeking your confidence — "

"Oh, no, sir! Not for a moment," exclaimed Christian, "could I entertain an idea so injurious toward you."

"Listen," proceeded Redcliffe. "A youth of your age — thrown upon his own resources, and abroad as it were in the wide world — must inevitably on various occasions need suitable counsel and advice from older and more experienced heads. If I err not, you are at this present moment in some such position. Your sister is well provided for, and I rejoice to hear it, but you yourself appear to be less satisfactorily situated. In a word, you are not happy at the Duke of Marchmont's, or else something has occurred — "

"Something has indeed occurred," said Christian, in a mournful voice, and after a few instants' reflection, he added, slowly and thoughtfully, "Yes, I do indeed require the counsel of some one who is enabled to give it. I feel that I am placed in a situation of considerable embarrassment, that I have a duty to perform toward an innocent lady whose destruction is resolved upon, but yet that in the performance of this duty I must play the hypocrite — "

"All this, Christian Ashton, is most serious," observed Mr. Redcliffe. "Let us walk to a more secluded place where we can converse together. I see that you will give me your confidence, and again I assure you that you shall never repent it."

Mr. Redcliffe and the youth diverged away together from the neighbourhood of Park Lane where their encounter had taken place, and they rambled slowly across the wide open field of the park. During this walk Christian explained to Mr. Redcliffe how he had happened to fall asleep in the library on the preceding night, how he had overheard the conversation between the Duke of Marchmont and the Honourable Mr. Stanhope, how, after serious deliberation with himself, he had resolved to dissemble his looks in the presence of his Grace, and retain his situation in the hope of frustrating the diabolical scheme which had been initiated against the duchess, but how when once this object should have been achieved, he was determined to seek his livelihood elsewhere.

Mr. Redcliffe listened in profound silence. He spoke not a single syllable throughout Christian's narrative; he walked slowly by the youth's side, with his eyes bent down, and when the tale was ended, upwards of a minute elapsed ere he breathed a word of comment.

"This is indeed most serious," at length observed Mr. Redcliffe, speaking slowly and deliberately, and also in subdued accents. "The views which you have entertained in connection therewith are all just and intelligent. You cannot proclaim the conspiracy aloud to the world, for the world would not believe you, while its laws would punish you as a slanderer and a calumniator. You cannot — at least for the present — warn the Duchess of Marchmont of her danger; or at all events it must not be done by words from your lips. Yet you must remain in your present situation, you must keep a strict watch upon all the Duke of Marchmont's proceedings, — yes, all of them. You must not hesitate — with false compunctions or overnice scruples — to listen, when opportunity serves, to conversations between the duke and his villainous accomplice Stanhope. Everything that comes to your knowledge must you report to me, and in me shall you find a faithful adviser as well as a sincere friend. Henceforth you will regard me as such, and you must never hesitate to seek my abode, no matter how often or at what hour. You possess feelings, Christian Ashton, which do you honour, and I experience a lively interest in your welfare. You need have no care for the future, for when the time shall come that you must leave a service which is evidently distasteful to you, it shall be my care and my pleasure to procure you another and a better situation. Farewell for the present."

With these words Mr. Redcliffe grasped Christian's hand cordially, and they separated. The youth felt infinitely relieved at having made a confidant of one in whom he had also found a friend, and he proceeded with a much lighter heart toward the Regent's Park. He saw his sister, and affectionate was the embrace in which the twins held each other. Christian mentioned the circumstance of his being already aware that Lord Octavian and Mr. Percival were one and the same person, and Christina frankly told him all the conversation which had taken place between herself and his lordship on the preceding day, — thus describing the motives which had induced her to conceal from Zoe the fact that she was previously acquainted with Octavian. Christian fully appreciated those motives, and expressed his belief that his sister had acted as she was bound to do under the circumstances. Christina then remarked that the Duke of Marchmont had called on the preceding day, adding, "He seems a very nice nobleman, and spoke in kind terms of you."

Christian had already made up his mind not to reveal to his sister those circumstances of which he had been speaking to Mr. Redcliffe, for he knew full well that Christina would only be afflicted at the thought of her brother being compelled to remain in a position which was distasteful to him. That observation of hers, so artlessly eulogistic of the duke, would have thrown Christian into considerable embarrassment, had not Zoe at the moment entered the room where this interview was taking place, and she welcomed the youth to the house in the most cordial manner. He walked out with his sister for an hour or two in the Regent's Park, and then returned to Belgrave Square.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE CRIME

It was between nine and ten o'clock in the evening of that day of which we have been writing in the preceding chapter, that three persons were advancing in three different directions toward the gold-beater's house in the midst of that maze of buildings lying between the lower parts of the Waterloo and Westminster Roads. One of those individuals was Barney the Burker, the second was Bill Scott, the third was his brother Tim. The two lads had been informed by Barnes that if they joined him at the Smedleys', they would probably be able to render some little assistance in a particular business which was then in hand, but beyond these few words the Burker gave no special explanations.

The night was dark and cold, not with the fine frosty weather which properly belonged to that December season of the year, but with a raw mistiness that damped the garments and collected on the hair and whiskers. It was an evening when those who were well clad would wrap their upper coats or their shawls, as the case might be, more closely around them, and when the scantily apparelled and the ragged children of poverty would hurry on with a continuous shivering of the frame which no acceleration of speed could however mitigate. Even the very baked-potato man would shudder visibly as he bawled out "All hot!" in a lustier voice than usual, and there was no need for naked-footed mendicants to affect a quivering misery of the form as they huddled up in doorways or hung upon the track of passers-by, imploring alms, for the reality of their half-perished state was keen enough. The street-lamps appeared to burn mistily, and the jets of gas at the butcher's shops and the coal sheds threw forth a less vivid glare than usual. Barney the Burker raised the collar of his coat over his ears, and pulled his greasy comforter up to his lips, at the same time diving both his hands into the capacious pockets of his coat, as he sped briskly along. The Scotts respectively pursued their own shivering ways, without the advantage of either upper coat or comforter, for the good luck which they had experienced in their predatory exploits the evening but one before had led to no improvement of their costume, inasmuch as Barney the Burker purposely kept them in this impoverished and half-ragged state that they might have the appearance of mendicants and thus all the more easily conduct their operations on the pockets of the unwary.

Barney was the first to reach the Smedleys' house, which he entered by means of the alley leading by the side of the chapel, and in a few minutes he was followed by the elder Scott. At the expiration of a few more minutes the younger lad joined them, and they were all three soon seated in the scullery in company with the Smedleys and Mrs. Webber. Liquor and glasses were upon the table, and supplies of hot grog were mixed, while the conversation commenced.

"Well, so nuffin was done yesterday?" said the Burker, after a few indifferent remarks had been exchanged. "I should have looked down last night accordin' to appintment, if it hadn't been for the message you, Jack, sent to the contrairy by Tim Scott when you happened to meet him."

"Don't you remember," said Mrs. Smedley, "it was agreed upon we should get hold of that letter which Mr. Smith was going to send off —"

"Ay, to be sure," remarked the Burker, "and so I suppose he didn't send no letter at all?"

"Not yesterday," replied Mrs. Smedley; "he said he should put it off till to-day."

"And he was in a worse tremble than ever when he said so," added the old mother.

"Quite narvous, eh?" said the Burker, and then he took a long draught of spirits and water. "There's nothing like this for the narves, and I do raly think that a genelman could go as a genelman ought to Tuck up Fair, and cut his last fling in an exceedin' dashin' style, if he was only well primed with lush. But come, what about this here letter?"

"It's nothing particular after all," said Jack Smedley. "But here it is — No, you have got it, Bab, and you can let Barney read it for himself."

"If the writing's at all queer," responded the Burker, "it's of no more use to ask me to read it than to tell a pig to dance a hornpipe on stilts. My larning might all be put into a thimble, and then leave room for the young lady which is accustomed to use it to put her forefinger in."

"Well, the writing isn't so trembling and shaky as one might expect to find it," said Bab Smedley, "and so you may read it for yourself."

With these words, she drew forth the intercepted letter, which she handed to Barney the Burker, who, having imbibed another draught from his tumbler, proceeded to peruse it in a cool and deliberate manner.

"No, there's nuffin here that's of any consequence to us," he observed, when he reached the end, "and so I suppose I may just as well light a pipe with it."

"No such thing," exclaimed Bab, snatching the letter out of the fellow's hand. "I mean to keep it — I have a fancy for doing so. Who knows but what some day or another it may be of use?"

"Ah, well, do just as you like," said the Burker, "but of course you don't mean to seal up the letter again and deliver it to-morrow morning at the place it's directed to?"

"Not quite such a fool," rejoined Mrs. Smedley.

"To be sure not," observed Barnes; "for him or her who took it to the house might be knowed again on any future occasion by the servant, or by them to which it is addressed, and then if any stir was made about the disappearance of a partickler individual — though by the bye, he doesn't give no name and no address in that there letter — "

"But he says enough," cried Jack Smedley, "to prove that he has been a jolly rogue in his way."

"How would it be," asked Mrs. Webber, "to make free with his purse before his very face; take it in a bold manner, I mean, and tell him to do his worst, for that we have found out all about him — "

"No," interrupted Bab Smedley, "that will not do. How do we know that he has really done sufficient to make him so terribly afraid of the law as we may think that he has? It is little better than surmise on our part, for that letter doesn't prove much, and is so vague."

"No, no, ma'am," said the Burker, addressing himself to Mrs. Webber, "it would never do to go on a mere wentur'. Whatsumever this Smith may have done, the loss of his purse might make him uproarious, raise the neighbourhood and send us all to limbo. The work must be done in quite another way."

"To be sure," said Bab Smedley, after a little reflection; "Barney is right. Smith may have been, and no doubt is, a great rogue — "

"And so let him be punished for his vickedness," interjected the Burker; then fixing his horrible eyes upon Bab Smedley, whom he evidently regarded as the supreme authority in that house, he said, "Well, I s'pose your mind's made up, and it's for to-night?"

"It must be for to-night if it is to be at all," responded Bab, "for he said he was going away to-morrow."

"And I am sure he will too, if he is alive to do it," said Mrs. Webber, "for he was packing up his few things in his carpet-bag when I went to his room with the supper-tray."

"Now then, you two fellers," said the Burker, as he filled himself another glass and thus addressed the Scotts, "you've already got to thank me for having done a blessed sight more to keep you on with your edication than ever your own parents would have done if they was alive to take care of yer. And so as you've got on so well in what one may call the rudiments of your larnin', I'm going to put you up into a higher class to-night and teach you another lesson. That was the reason I told you to come here on this partiklar occasion, and p'raps it is as well that there should be as much help as possible."

The two lads said not a word, but they seemed to have a perfect idea that some darker and deeper wickedness than any they had been yet acquainted with was about to be perpetrated. Bill Scott's large goggle eyes stared in a sort of glassy admiration upon the Burker, whom he evidently regarded as a very fine fellow, while his brother Tim leered with a horrible knowingness upon the same individual, — thus not merely indicating that he comprehended the nature of the deed that was to be done, but that he was all too ready to bear a part in it.

The Burker and Bab Smedley conversed together for some minutes in whispers; then whispered remarks were also interchanged betwixt them, the woman's husband, and her mother, and in a short time the plan of proceeding was duly settled. Soon afterward — it being now about half-past ten o'clock — Mrs. Webber lighted a chamber candle, and quitted the scullery. In a few minutes she returned, and having carefully closed the door, she observed, " I have been up to ask him if he wants anything more; he says no, for that he is going to bed."

" And you didn't tell him," asked the Burker, with a horrible grin, " that you had some friends here which would presently bring him up his gruel? "

" He told me to call him early," continued the old woman, not heeding the interjected remark which was so replete with a revolting levity in its allusion to the dreadful crime that had been determined upon. " I asked him at what hour, and he said at six o'clock, as he wanted to get off before daylight, for now that his mind was made up for departure, he says, he has a very great way to go."

" His departur', I rayther think," said Barnes, pursuing his vein of hideous, horrible jocularity, " will take place sooner than he suspects, and the way he has to go will be a precious deal longer than he has bargained for."

" He says he is going upon the Continent," added Mrs. Webber.

" Well, if he likes to give that there name to the place where old Nick lives, he is wery welcome," observed Barney.

" I left him, and he locked the door, as he always does," said Mrs. Webber.

" I've got my tools with me," exclaimed the Burker. " There's as tidy a lot of skellingtons as ever was seen," and as he thus spoke, he produced an old cotton pocket-handkerchief in which the skeleton keys thus alluded to were so wrapped up as to prevent them from rattling or chinking as he walked.

" I am afraid your tools will be of no good, Barney," said Mrs. Webber, " for the lodger always leaves the key in the lock. The door must not be forced open with any degree of violence; he would raise the whole neighbourhood with his cries and yells in no time."

"What should prevent us from getting in at the window?" asked Jack Smedley. "It looks on the back yard —"

"Winders be hanged!" ejaculated the Burker. "If he sleeps light, he would be sure and hear the noise of the winder lifting up, and if so be it's fastened, there's the chance of smashing the glass in cutting out a hole with the glazier's di'mond to thrust one's fist in and unfasten it. No, no, that's not the dodge. Don't be afeard, ma'am," continued the ruffian, addressing himself specially to Mrs. Webber, "I'll soon have the key out of the lock, and no mistake."

"How?" inquired Jack Smedley.

"Never do you mind; you'll see all about it byme bye. But we must do nuffin for an hour or so, till the covy's fast locked in the arms of Murphy. So now for a booze and blowing a cloud."

An hour and a half were passed in drinking on the part of all, combined with smoking on that of the male portion of the miscreant gang, and when the kitchen clock had proclaimed midnight, the Burker knocked the ashes out of his pipe and drained his glass.

"Now for business," he said, rising from his seat, "Come, Jack, you will go along with me; so let's take off our boots. You," he added, turning to Mrs. Smedley, "must come to hold the candle. You, ma'am, — and you two lads, — must wait down here till you're wanted?"

Barney and Jack Smedley took off their boots, and Mrs. Smedley, with the chamber candle in her hand, led the way from the scullery. Noiselessly and cautiously did the three wretches ascend to the first floor, — the old woman and the two lads remaining below. With such stealthiness did the Burker and the Smedleys mount the stairs, that not a board creaked, and Bab was careful that her garments should not even rustle against the wall. On reaching the landing, the Burker bade Mrs. Smedley hold the candle near the keyhole, but so shade it with her hand that the light should not penetrate through into the chamber. He then applied his ear to the keyhole, and listened with breathless attention. Perhaps a person less experienced than the ruffian was in such matters would scarcely have succeeded in ascertaining that the inmate of the chamber slept, but Barney had made all these sorts of things a particular study, and there was no detail requisite for the working out of a successful iniquity, which he had not carefully practised. Slowly withdrawing his head from the vicinage of the keyhole at the expiration of a minute, he gave his accomplices to understand by a significant nod that their intended victim slept. Yes, he slept at the midnight hour, when the ruthless miscreants were bent upon his destruction.

The key, as Mrs. Webber had represented, was in the lock, and Barney now ascertained that it was turned around in such a way that it could not be pushed straight into the room, even if he had entertained the notion of adopting a course which by being certain to make it fall on the boards within, would stand the chance of startling the lodger. The end of the key projected out a very little way from the hole, on the exterior side of the door, and the Burker, having directed Bab to hold the light in a particular manner, proceeded with his operations. He drew forth from his pocket a stout piece of wire, and this he fastened around the end of the key. It was now easy to turn the key in such a way that it could be thrust out of the lock on the inner side of the door; while the wire not merely prevented it from falling on the boards, but likewise held it pendent at a sufficient distance from the door itself so as to preclude the possibility of its knocking against the panels. A skeleton key was now introduced into the lock thus skilfully cleared, and in a few minutes the door was opened.

Barney made a sign for Bab to stand back, so that not a single gleam of light should penetrate into the room, and again he listened attentively. All of a sudden he closed the door, and made another sign, to indicate that the lodger was awakening. A panic-terror seized upon Jack Smedley, and clutching the Burker with one hand, and his wife with the other, he endeavoured to drag them both away from the spot. Bab herself was irresolute how to act; the Burker, ferociously determined, shook Smedley off, and made fierce gesticulations to the effect that the work must be finished, for that they had gone too far to recede. But Jack Smedley was no longer master of himself; he was trembling all over, his countenance was as pale as death, and the infection of his own terrors was being rapidly communicated to his wife. The Burker continued to gesticulate in a menacing manner, and his looks denoted supreme disgust and contempt for Jack Smedley.

"No, no! the whole neighbourhood will be alarmed," whispered this individual, as he once more clutched the Burker by the arm.

"Ah! what's this?" cried a voice from within, at the same instant that the handle of the door was heard to turn, and the key pendent to the wire knocked against the panel.

Barney dashed the door violently open, and a heavy fall was heard, instantaneously followed by a cry for help. Then the Burker dealt a tremendous blow with the butt end of a pistol which he snatched forth from his pocket, and Bab Smedley, suddenly recalling all her courage, rushed in with the light. The lodger lay upon the floor, low moans escaping from his lips, but those quickly ceased, as the remorseless Burker dealt him another terrific blow with his weapon, — a blow which beat in the unfortunate victim's forehead. It was done, the murder was accomplished, and that victim was no more.

It was evident that being disturbed by the noise at the door, he had got out of bed to ascertain what was the matter; he had huddled on his pantaloons, and he was about to open the door to listen whether all was quiet, or whether there were indeed anything wrong going on in the house, when the circumstance of his hand encountering the wire and the key had confirmed his terror and had caused an ejaculation to fall from his lips. There he now lay upon the floor, a corpse, with his forehead battered in.

"Come, you fool," said Bab Smedley to her husband, "don't stand like a coward there — "

"No coward, Bab. That feeling is gone," interrupted Jack, whose courage now likewise returned, the fear of danger being suddenly passed. "Let's look after the swag."

"Ay, that's it," said the Burker, "and dispose of the stiff'un arterward. Well, the job was done neat enough arter all, though I tell you what, Master Jack, no thanks to you if we didn't make a mess of the whole affair. You and me has done two or three things in our lifetime, but I never see you get so chicken-hearted afore."

"It wasn't the thing itself I was afraid of," answered Smedley, by no means relishing these taunts; "it was the fear of having the whole neighbourhood roused."

"And so you would, if it hadn't been for me," rejoined the Burker in a savage tone. "Howsumever, it's all over now — Ah, and here's the blunt!"

For while the ruffian was giving utterance to those words, he stooped down and felt in the pockets of the murdered man's pantaloons. He drew forth two purses, and a hasty examination of the contents showed him that though one contained but a trifle of money, the contents of the other amounted to about five hundred pounds. This was an infinitely greater treasure than any of the wretches expected to acquire by their deed of turpitude, and their spirits rose to the highest point of horrible exultation.

"Now let Mrs. Webber come and mop up them boards at vunce," said the Burker, "or else there'll be marks on 'em as will tell tales. And you, Bab, can stop with the lads to get the trap-door up, while me and Jack brings down the stiff'un. The sooner all's put to rights the better."

Mrs. Smedley, placing the light upon a chest of drawers, hastily descended the stairs, and in a few minutes the old woman made her appearance in the chamber, with a pail of hot water and a flannel. But little blood had flowed on the floor, and none had reached the carpet, of which there was only a slip by the side of the bed. The vile woman showed no more feeling than that which a slight shudder expressed, as her first glance was flung upon the corpse, and this arose merely from a swiftly transient sense of recoil from the spectacle of the battered forehead, but certainly not from any compunction at the atrocious deed itself. The floor was soon cleansed with the flannel, and then, as the old woman held the light, the Burker and Jack Smedley, raising the body between them, began to carry it down the stairs.

The scullery was reached, and now the two lads for the first time looked upon a form whence murder had expelled the breath of life, — for the first time did they behold a corpse which was made so by the black turpitude of assassination. An instant — and only for an instant — did they shrink back from the spectacle; a moment, too, — and only for a moment, — did their minds appear to receive a shock, and then their brutal, savage self-possession was regained; the fierceness of their instincts appeared to triumph over any latent glimmering of their better feelings. The Burker contemplated them both from the corners of his eyes; he saw full well what was passing within them, and a devilish expression of satisfaction appeared upon his hideous countenance, as he felt that they were now more than ever bound fast in the trammels which he had cast around them, and by means of which he rendered them ductile and pliant to all his purposes of evil.

The table was moved away from the middle of the scullery, the square piece of carpet on which it was wont to stand was likewise taken up, and a trap-door was raised. This trap-door revealed a considerable aperture; it was the mouth of a pit, whence a disagreeable earthy smell came up. There were steps leading down into the abyss, and to that depth was the corpse conveyed by Barney the Burker and Jack Smedley. The two women and the two lads stood close by the trap-door, gazing upon the scene which the light of the candle illuminated with a sufficiency to throw out its most hideous and ghastly features. And horrible indeed was that scene, — horrible the face of the miscreant Burker, bending over the rigid and blood-stained countenance of the murdered man, — that countenance, too, on the upper part of which there appeared so frightful a wound.

"Hush," said Bab Smedley, suddenly breaking the silence which prevailed. "I do believe there is some one in the passage up-stairs."

"Nonsense," growled the Burker, "if all the doors is shut, how can there be any one in the house? And if there is, we'll sarve him as we've done the stiff'un here."

"Do be quiet," whispered Mrs. Smedley, with affrighted impatience. "I am certain there are footsteps."

The woman spoke so confidently that all did now remain perfectly quiet, with suspended breath, but no sound met their ears, and Mrs. Smedley yielded to the conclusion that it was only fancy on her part. But all of a sudden there was a strange rushing noise in the passage above; the body fell from the Burker's grasp, and Jack Smedley, who was lower down the steps, sustaining the feet of the murdered man, fell backward with considerable violence, the corpse rolling upon him. It was in the bottom of the vault that this horrible incident took place, and a cry of terror ascended from that depth. Then the next moment the gold-beater was seen rushing up the steps as if he were demented, his hair standing on end, his countenance ghastly pale, his lips white, his eyes rolling with horror.

"You fool, you!" muttered his wife, clutching him violently by the arm, and giving him a savage shake; "you'll make yourself heard yet before you have done."

It must be observed that Barney the Burker had not let the corpse fall through any access of panic-terror, but merely that he might rush up-stairs and ascertain the cause of that strange sweeping sound which had reached the ears of those in the scullery. But on opening the door and listening, he found that all was still.

"Give me a light," he said, "and I'll go over the house just for your saytisfaction; 'cos why, none of you seem able to do it for yourselves."

A candle was immediately supplied him by one of the lads, and the instant he appeared in the ground-floor passage with that light, the rushing sound was heard again, and an enormous cat which had been crouching on the mat sprang up the stairs to the higher stories. The Burker gave a chuckling laugh, and descending to the scullery, closed the door, saying, "It's on'y a great big black cat that's got into the house."

"It's the people's at the beer shop," exclaimed Bab Smedley.

"But isn't it strange," asked the gold-beater, who was shuddering all over, "that the brute should cut about the house like that? Doesn't it seem as if it knew what had been done?" and with his haggard eyes he glanced toward the mouth of the vault.

"Well, I des say there's summut like instink in the affair," said the Burker, coolly, "but as cats can't speak, they can't tell no tales, and so we needn't bother ourselves any more about the matter. Come, Jack, take a drop of brandy, and don't make such a fool of yourself as you seem to be doing. Why, I can't make out what's come over you all on a sudden, that you have got so precious chicken-hearted. It isn't a wery good example you're setting them lads. Where's the quicklime?"

"All ready down below," responded Bab Smedley; then addressing herself to her husband, she said, savagely, "There, toss off that brandy, and be a man. I'm ashamed of you."

The gold-beater drank the raw spirit which his wife handed him, and his courage speedily revived again.

"Come now, my boys, and lend a hand below," said the

Burker; "you must 'custom yerselves to get familiar with stiff'uns. You come too, Jack."

The gold-beater and the Burker descended into the vault, with a candle, — the two Scotts following with readiness and alacrity. A spade and pickaxe were in the pit, a hole was speedily dug, sufficiently large to receive the corpse, a quantity of quicklime was thrown upon it, the earth was shovelled back, it was well flattened down, so as to make the bottom of the subterranean level, and thus the work was accomplished.

The trap-door was closed, the carpet was drawn over it, the table was restored to its place, quantities of spirits and water were mixed, and the wretches caroused above the spot to which their victim had been consigned. The Burker and Bab Smedley ascended to the chamber where the deed was accomplished; they ransacked the contents of the carpet-bag, but they found no papers of any kind, no further hoard of money. But on the drawers was a very handsome repeater-watch, together with a gold pencil-case and two or three rings. These valuables were of course taken possession of, and the two wretches descended to rejoin their companions. A division of the booty now took place, more grog was drunk, and it was past two in the morning when the Burker and the Scotts took their departure, at intervals of a few minutes, by means of the back part of the premises and the narrow alley by the side of the chapel.

"You behaved like a fool to-night," said Bab Smedley to her husband, when they were at length alone together in their own chamber.

"I can't tell what it was that came over me when we were all three together at his door," said the gold-beater. "And then the affair in the vault was horrible enough. To have that corpse come tumbling down upon one was sufficient to make the hair stand on end. And mind you, Bab, you were not altogether yourself to-night; you were frightened up at the door, and you were frightened again too by the noise of that cursed cat."

"Well, there's enough of it," said the woman sharply, for her husband had spoken truly, and she herself had been more accessible to terror on this particular night than on the occasion of any previous deed of iniquity.

"I tell you what, Bab," said the gold-beater, looking somewhat nervously around the room, and speaking in the half-hushed voice which denoted a certain inward appalled feeling, " I don't like that affair of the cat. There was something superstitious in it. It was the animal's instinct."

" Now, will you have done? " demanded Bab Smedley, turning with sudden fierceness around upon her husband, but her own face was as ghastly pale as his was, and as their eyes met he saw that she was under the same superstitious terror as that which was awing and appalling his own soul.

CHAPTER XXV

THE LISTENER

A WEEK had elapsed since the occurrences just related, and during this interval the Honourable Wilson Stanhope had called three or four times, and had dined twice at Marchmont House.

He was a man of about five and thirty years of age, handsome, though with a somewhat dissipated and rakish look. He had been for some years in the Horse Guards, and although his necessities had compelled him to sell his commission, he still affected to a certain degree a military appearance; that is to say, he continued to wear his moustache. His features were regular, but somewhat bold and prominent; the expression of his countenance was decidedly sensuous. His hair was light; his eyes were large, and had a look of bold hardihood when contemplating females, — thus indicating the thorough libertine. Though of profligate habits, a confirmed gamester, a spendthrift, and an unprincipled seducer, yet he had done nothing to cause his expulsion from fashionable society. A man may cheat a thousand creditors if they be only tradesmen, without losing his caste, but if he fail to pay a single debt contracted on the race-course or at the gaming-table, he at once forfeits his rank and consideration as a gentleman. He may beguile credulous women by myriads of dishonourable artifices, and yet he can still hold his head high and proclaim himself an honourable man. But if he forfeit his word in the slightest degree to any individual in his own sphere, his honour is instantaneously considered as lost. Such are the usages, rules, and customs of the fashionable world, and therefore a man like Mr. Stanhope, though saturated with all vices, may continue to look everybody in the face, and no one will dream of excluding him from the sphere in which he moves.

Such was the individual who was leagued with the Duke of Marchmont to accomplish the destruction of the duchess. During the week which had elapsed since the infamous compact was made, he had already been admitted to a footing of intimacy in the duke's mansion, and the duchess had received him with a becoming courtesy. She herself was ignorant of his profligate habits; she might perhaps have heard it whispered " that he was a little gay," but though herself a thoroughly well principled and right-minded woman, she nevertheless knew that if she were to look coldly upon all the male portion of her visitors who bore a similar reputation to that of Mr. Stanhope, she would have to debar herself from society altogether. Besides, she was docile to the will of her husband; it was not in her nature to rebel against him. She was already unhappy enough on account of his neglect to be careful not to aggravate it into downright hatred, for she knew not the full extent of that feeling of bitterness which he entertained toward her. His friends became her friends; it was sufficient for Lavinia that her husband wished her to receive any particular individuals with cordiality, to ensure that hospitable welcome on her part, and thus was she giving her hand to the villain who was secretly pledged to the accomplishment of her destruction.

In order that the reader may properly understand the scene which we are about to relate, it is necessary to give some little description of that cabinet which joined the library. It has already been described as a sort of slip, containing only one window, and commodious enough for a person to lounge in by himself, or for a couple of friends to indulge in a confidential chat or discuss a bottle of wine. It seemed to have been intended by the architect who built the mansion to serve as a little retiring-room from the library itself, for in addition to the door opening from the passage, there was another door of communication between the cabinet and the library. But on taking possession of that mansion, the Duke of Marchmont had completely cut off the cabinet from the library, by having the door fastened up and book-shelves arranged against it in the library itself. The fact was, his Grace had purchased more books than the original conveniences of the library could well contain. Not that he himself had purposed at the time to plunge headlong into all those intellectual treasures; his reading was limited enough, — the newspapers and new novels, with perhaps a few political pamphlets and Parliamentary Blue Books, constituting the range thereof. Those quantities of volumes therefore, so elegantly bound, were bought for ornament and show, just as were the vases which stood upon the landings, the specimens of sculpture on the staircases and in the passages, or the pictures which hung to the walls. He had purchased, then, — as we have said, — more books than could be conveniently stowed away in the cases originally provided for them, and not choosing to have them thrust into a cupboard or put anywhere out of sight, he had caused shelves to be arranged against the door opening into the cabinet.

Now, Christian had one day discovered, while sitting in the cabinet, that a conversation going on in the library could be overheard with very little difficulty by any one in the former place; that is to say, if such person chose to play the part of a regular eavesdropper and apply his ear to to the door which was fastened up. Be it well understood that Christian would under ordinary circumstances have scorned to become a willing and wilful eavesdropper, but he had been counselled by Mr. Redcliffe to keep the strictest watch on the proceedings and conduct of the Duke of Marchmont, and this advice, under those circumstances which are known to the reader, he was resolved to follow out.

One forenoon — at the expiration of that week to which we have alluded — Christian was seated with the Duke of Marchmont in the library, when a domestic entered to announce that Mr. Armytage solicited an immediate interview with his Grace. Christian perceived a strong expression of vexation and annoyance pass over the duke's countenance, — an expression indeed which was so extraordinary that, though it immediately passed away, it dwelt in the youth's mind. He of course knew that Mr. Armytage was Lady Octavian Meredith's father; he knew likewise that the Duke of Marchmont visited the Merediths, and he was therefore astonished that the announcement of the name of Zoe's sire should produce such an effect on his ducal employer.

More than all this, too, he had learned from his sister, in the course of conversation, that Mr. Armytage was many years back a dependent of the duke's in the form of land-steward, bailiff, or something of the kind, and that thence was the origin of his fortune. How was it, therefore, that his Grace should unwittingly evince such an antipathy to the mere mention of Mr. Armytage's name?

"You can retire," said the duke to Christian when the servant had withdrawn to introduce Mr. Armytage. "There is no more correspondence requiring my attention to-day, and your time is therefore now your own."

Christian bowed and issued from the library, but he was irresistibly led to enter the cabinet, where upon the table lay two or three books which he had selected for perusal and which he had left there. It can be easily understood how, in the circumstances in which young Ashton was placed, everything that seemed at all mysterious or unaccountable in respect to the Duke of Marchmont should have become a matter of deep importance to himself. And then, too, the counsel he had received from Mr. Redcliffe was continuously uppermost in his mind, — to keep a watch on all the duke's proceedings, and to report everything to the said Clement Redcliffe. He had the highest confidence in this gentleman's sagacity and good intentions, and without at all foreseeing the means which Mr. Redcliffe might recommend for contravening the diabolical plot that was now in full progress against the honour and well-being of the duchess, Christian felt assured that the more facts he could glean in respect to the duke's proceedings, the greater would become the resources and the easier the plans by which Mr. Redcliffe would accomplish the salvation of the duchess and the discomfiture of her foes. All these considerations decided Christian to listen to what was about to take place between Marchmont and Mr. Armytage.

"Your Grace will excuse me for intruding thus early upon your privacy," said Armytage, as he was ushered into the library, "but when I explain myself — "

"You don't mean to say," interrupted the duke, "that you have any fresh favour to ask at my hands, any new demand to make upon me?"

"Indeed, my lord," replied Armytage, "I come to you for that purpose."

"And what is it?" asked the duke. "Why, it is but six or seven months ago since I did all you required me in a certain matter," thus significantly alluding to the impulse which he had given to the courtship of Octavian Meredith in respect to the beautiful Zoe.

"I am perfectly sensible, my lord," responded Armytage, "of all your great kindness on that occasion, and I can assure you that nothing but the sternest necessity would bring me hither as a suppliant for an additional proof of your generosity and friendship."

"On my soul, this language of yours, Armytage," said the duke, curtly, "is foreboding of a demand of no ordinary magnitude."

"It is an affair of magnitude to myself," rejoined Zoe's father, "but of very trifling consideration to your Grace."

"Well, hasten and come to the point," said the duke, "for I have business to attend to elsewhere."

"This, then, is the point, my lord," resumed Armytage. "I am in immediate need of fifty thousand pounds."

"Fifty thousand pounds?" echoed Marchmont, and his voice, to Christian's ears, sounded as if it were expressive of a perfect consternation.

"Nothing more nor less, my lord," responded Armytage, with a decisiveness which was far more astonishing to young Ashton.

"But this is ridiculous," cried the duke. "You — a rich man — "

"Have the kindness to hear me, my lord," interrupted the speculator. "Some three months back — or nearly so — a certain person in whom I had the utmost faith decamped suddenly, leaving his own affairs in such a frightful condition that a fiat of bankruptcy was issued against him. He has not surrendered to that fiat; indeed he has never since been heard of, and so completely ruined was he — or else so effectually did he realize his available funds, and thereby defraud his creditors — that there is not a shilling in the pound to divide amongst them. But this is not all. He committed forgeries to the amount of thirty thousand pounds, and unfortunately all those forged bills have passed through my hands. My name is upon them; they will be due to-morrow, and the holders will look to me for the liquidation thereof. But in addition to those forged bills, I am a sufferer to the extent of an additional twenty thousand pounds by this Mr. Preston — "

" Preston — Preston? " said the duke, in a musing tone. " What — he who lived — "

" Not far from me, in the Regent's Park."

" Ah, to be sure. The Ashtons — "

" I know it, my lord," said Armytage. " That young lady who is staying with my daughter, and her brother, who is in your lordship's household, suffered in some way or another by that man's flight."

" And is it possible that you are really hampered? " demanded the duke, in a tone of voice which showed how little agreeable to him was Armytage's request for a loan.

" I have told your Grace precisely how I am situated," replied Mr. Armytage, " and every moment that we expend in conversation is so much time unnecessarily thrown away."

" But fifty thousand pounds," said the duke; " it is an enormous sum. I do not exceed my income, but I live close up to it, and positively I cannot lay my hands at a moment's warning on a quarter of that amount. Indeed I question whether I have ten thousand at my banker's at this present instant."

" The Duke of Marchmont's name is good at his banker's for one hundred thousand, if that were all," responded Armytage, with the tone of a man who was by no means inclined to take a refusal, nor to hear difficulties started without overruling them.

" Yes, but one does not always like to borrow of one's banker," continued the duke.

" Then I will introduce your Grace to a person in the City — "

" What! a money-lender? " ejaculated Marchmont, as if in deep indignation and disgust.

" I do not think," responded Armytage, " that it would be the first time your lordship had come in contact with usurers. When simply Lord Clandon — "

" Enough, Travers, enough," exclaimed the duke, sternly and curtly.

" Ah, my lord," quickly interjected Armytage, " you have let slip a name which I have long ceased to bear."

" Did I? I noticed it not," said the duke. " But really, my dear Armytage, you must raise this money in some other way — "

" Impossible, my lord. I cannot do it with my own resources. If I went to a money-lender to ask for a loan on my own account, it would be whispered abroad, and I should be ruined. But if your Grace will not borrow of your banker, and if you also have an insuperable objection against applying to a usurer, you may give me your bill or your bond, and with such a security I can at once obtain the funds I require."

" And about the repayment? " asked the duke. " Consider, Armytage; fifty thousand pounds is no small debt to contract."

" I am aware of it," responded Zoe's father, " but I have no fear in respect to my ability to refund it in due time. I have numerous sums to receive from noblemen and gentlemen in the course of the year — "

" Then wherefore not render those securities available for your purpose? " ejaculated Marchmont, clutching greedily at the idea which he hoped might save him from having to yield to Armytage's demand.

" Because, my lord," was the reply, " if I were to part with those securities, I should lose my clients. The money-lenders into whose hands they fell would take away my patrons from me."

" But really, Travers — "

" That name again," ejaculated Armytage.

" Well, well, you have yourself to blame for it, inasmuch as you ere now recalled those times when you bore that name, and when you were very differently situated from what you are now. Consider all I have done for you — "

" In one word, my lord," interrupted Armytage, " am I to have this money? or am I not? "

" And if I say that I cannot possibly accommodate you? " inquired the duke.

" Then I am a ruined man, and I blow my brains out," was the unhesitating rejoinder given by Zoe's father. " But, my lord, in such an extreme and frightful case," he added, in a voice so low that his words only just reached Christian's ears, " I should not pass out of the world without leaving behind me a written history of my life, and all my experiences of whatsoever sort they may have been."

There was a long pause in the discourse, and it was at length broken by the Duke of Marchmont, who said, " At what time to-day must you have this money? "

" It should all be paid into my banker's hands by five o'clock this evening," responded Armytage.

" It shall be there," said the duke, and almost immediately afterward Zoe's father took his departure.

Christian instantaneously quitted the cabinet, for fear lest the duke should happen to look into that room, and he at once ascended to his own chamber. There he sat down to reflect upon what he had heard. He was sorry that he had listened: remorseful feelings arose within him, inasmuch as none of the discourse which had thus reached his ears bore the slightest reference to the horrible conspiracy in progress against the peace and reputation of the Duchess of Marchmont. Christian could not hide from himself the fact that he had done an unhandsome thing; in sooth, he was ashamed of his own conduct. He did not know whether to report all he had learned to Mr. Redcliffe, or not. But still he thought that as he had in the first instance set himself to listen with a special object, he had better communicate the results to that gentleman. And this reflection led him on to another, — which was that it was probable Mr. Redcliffe's plan of proceeding was to gain possession of some secrets in respect to the duke, for the purpose of wielding them as a means for compelling him to do justice to the unfortunate duchess.

" And if this be Mr. Redcliffe's aim," thought Christian to himself, " it is perhaps fortunate after all that I did listen to the conversation between his Grace and Mr. Armytage. I am fighting in a good cause and on the side of justice. The cause is that of an inoffensive, a virtuous, and an excellent lady, against whom the foulest of conspiracies is set on foot, and all weapons which Mr. Redcliffe and myself may use to frustrate the odious scheme are fair and legitimate."

These reflections cheered the youth's spirits, and immediately after dinner he repaired to Mortimer Street, Cavendish Square. He had never been there but once since he and Christina resigned their lodgings in the house, and that once was on the occasion when he and his sister called upon Mrs. Macaulay to inquire whether she could give them any advice toward extricating them from the difficulties wherein they were placed at the time.

Christian knocked at the door, which was speedily opened by Mrs. Macaulay in person, for she had seen him pass her parlour window. Perceiving that he was well dressed and was evidently in comfortable circumstances, the prudent landlady gave him a hearty welcome, which she could safely do, as his appearance relieved her of the idea that he was possibly coming to borrow money, in which case she had an excuse in readiness. She would have been extremely sorry, nothing would have given her greater pleasure, but she had only that very morning paid her rent, and what with this disbursement and her Christmas bills, she was drained quite dry. But fortunately Mrs. Macaulay was spared this tissue of falsehoods, inasmuch as Christian came for no money-hunting purpose whatsoever.

" And how do you do? " she exclaimed, shaking him by the hand, " and how is that dear sister of yours? I have often and often thought of you, and wondered why you never dropped in to take a friendly cup of tea. I had been thinking that I would call on Mrs. Giles to learn if you were still with her, and how you were getting on, but I have been so busy. For the rooms you used to occupy were let — immediately after you left — to an elderly couple. Though between you and me," she added, lowering her voice to a whisper, and putting on a look of mysterious confidence, " they are no great shakes, for Mr. Johnson — that's the name — locks up his wine and brandy, and Mrs. Johnson never by any accident leaves the key in the tea-caddy. Now isn't that mean? "

While thus speaking, Mrs. Macaulay had led the way into her parlour, and Christian, in order to avoid giving an answer to the question with which she had so indignantly concluded her speech, inquired if Mr. Redcliffe was at home.

" No, but he will be in almost directly," replied Mrs. Macaulay. " Do sit down and take a glass of wine."

" No, I thank you, not in the middle of the day."

" Well, and you are quite right," exclaimed the landlady. " Never drink wine in the middle of the day. I never do, unless it is at a neighbour's, or a lodger happens to leave a drop at the bottom of a bottle. Not that the Johnsons do. No, bless you! They even decant their port down to the very dregs, and that, you know, is so excessively mean. But what do you want with Mr. Redcliffe? "

"I met him about a week ago," answered Christian, "and he desired me to call upon him."

"He is a very excellent man, though eccentric," resumed Mrs. Macaulay. "I never had a better lodger. Whatever is left cold, he seems entirely to forget, and never asks to have it up. Now that is what I like. His maxim is evidently, 'Live and let live,' and so it should be. He gives very little trouble, and is a man of the fewest possible words that I ever knew. He receives no visitors, and likes to be alone. The other evening it struck me that he might possibly be dull — I recollect I had nothing in the house for my own supper that particular evening — However, that is not to the point. But at nine o'colck, when his supper-tray went up, I followed, and I said in the politest manner, 'Really, Mr. Redcliffe, I can't bear to know that you are always sitting alone, and I thought perhaps you would only deem it an act of courtesy if I just stepped up to have half an hour's chat with you.' But no! he assured me that he preferred being alone, and that he could not think of taking me away from my own domestic avocations. Well, I was obliged to leave him to eat his supper all by himself, and it was so provoking, for I had put on my best cap and gown on purpose, and had made myself look so smart. But isn't he an odd man?"

Christian could have said, if he had liked, that he really did not see anything so particularly odd in Mr. Redcliffe's conduct on the occasion referred to, but he did not choose to wound Mrs. Macaulay's feelings, and so he evaded the necessity of giving a direct reply by observing, "He is a very charitable and generous-hearted man."

"Perhaps then he has done something for you?" exclaimed Mrs. Macaulay, quickly.

"No, it was not necessary," rejoined Christian, — "at least not when I met him a week ago. Previously to then — as you are indeed somewhat aware — I and my poor sister had to encounter severe troubles, but the tide of ill fortune suddenly changed, and on the same day we both obtained situations, — Christina as companion to Lady Octavian Meredith, and I as private secretary to the Duke of Marchmont."

"Dear me, dear me!" ejaculated Mrs. Macaulay; "to think of your good luck. You had really better take a glass of wine after your walk, and a nice bit of cake? And if my lodgings should happen to become vacant, you will have such opportunities, you know, to recommend them to a Member of Parliament, and you can speak an excellent word in my favour, for you recollect how good I always was to you both."

Christian certainly must have been troubled with a very short memory at the time, for he could not recollect any particular boon conferred upon himself and his sister by Mrs. Macaulay, unless indeed it were the recommendation to Mr. Samuel Emanuel, which, however well-meant, had nevertheless entailed upon his sister nothing but insult. As she continued to press the refreshment of wine and cake, — both, be it understood, having descended from Mr. Redcliffe's apartments, — he again declined the offer, but with a becoming courtesy.

"And so you are secretary to a duke?" she exclaimed, surveying Christian with as much admiration as if he were some rare animal just brought over from distant parts and lodged in the Zoölogical Gardens, "and you must therefore sit alone with his Grace for hours and hours. Well, I never spoke to a duke in my life, and I don't think I ever saw a live one, — at least not to my knowledge. But I saw a dead duke once. It was in Edinburgh, during poor dear Mr. Macaulay's time, for to tell you the truth, he was an undertaker, and I went with him when he measured the body for the coffin. And your sister is companion to Lady Octavian Meredith? and I suppose her ladyship makes much of your dear Christina? Well, I am delighted to find that you have got on so well in the world. You will make your fortunes. Ah! I never shall forget how I cried that time when you came and told me how Mr. Emanuel acted. I didn't choose to shed tears in your presence, because I was afraid it would dispirit you both, but when you were gone, I sat down and did have a good cry, and that's the truth of it. Dear me, to think of those Emanuels. Why, I knew Samuel Emanuel when he was an orange boy, selling his fruit to the passengers that went off by the coaches from the White Horse, Piccadilly. Then he took to selling knives with twenty-four blades, not one of which, between you and me, would even cut so much as your nail. Next I found Mr. Samuel Emanuel going about with a bag at his back, and Heaven only knows how many hats piled up on the top of his head, so that he looked like a walking stack of chimneys with a number of black chimney-pots stuck one above the other. Next I remember him standing in front of a little, poking, beggarly, second-hand clothes' shop in Holywell Street, his wife a dirty drab, looking all greasy and oily, and his children playing in the gutter. Then he moved to his present house, which has grown by rapid degrees into — what does he call it? Oh, an emporium! And now he rides in his carriage, and I suppose that if I happened to meet his wife, I must curtsy to her. Ah, what a world this is!"

And then, as if almost overcome by the feelings which this pathetic moral reflection conjured up, Mrs. Macaulay moved in an abstracted manner toward her cupboard, where she poured out and drank off the glass of wine which she had so recently been pressing upon Christian. At this moment there was a double knock at the front door, and the worthy woman exclaimed, as she wiped her lips, "There's Mr. Redcliffe."

A few minutes afterward Christian was seated with that gentleman in the apartment on the first floor. Redcliffe received him in the kindest manner, but being a man of very few words, except when it was necessary to speak at length, he soon gave the youth an opportunity of explaining the motive of his visit. Christian told him all that had passed between the Duke of Marchmont and Mr. Armytage, and Redcliffe listened in silence to the narrative.

"I hope, sir," said the youth, in conclusion, "that you will not think I have done wrong in listening to that discourse?"

"By no means, my young friend," responded Redcliffe. "We may consider ourselves to be engaged in warfare on behalf of an oppressed lady, and we must not hesitate to avail ourselves of whatsoever weapons accident may put in our hands."

"That is precisely the view which I took of the matter," exclaimed Christian, delighted that there should be such an identity of thought on the part of himself and Clement Redcliffe. "Ah, by the bye, I forgot to mention something," he cried, as a recollection struck him. "Twice during the conversation did the Duke of Marchmont address Mr. Armytage by the name of Travers."

"Travers?" said Mr. Redcliffe.

"Yes, and it would appear," continued Christian, "that this was the name which Mr. Armytage formerly bore, when he was not so high up in the world."

Mr. Redcliffe reflected profoundly for some minutes, and at length he said, with an abruptness which he often displayed, "No, Christian Ashton, you have not done wrong in listening to what took place with those persons. Continue to watch the duke's movements, gather up whatsoever you may hear passing around you at Marchmont House, store all words and facts in your memory, no matter how trivial they may at the moment appear, and from time to time make your report to me. Rest assured that we will baffle the conspirators, and that the injured duchess shall issue triumphant from amidst the perils which environ her. You will then have done a noble deed, and for whatsoever trouble it may have cost you, you will experience an ample reward in the luxury of your own feelings."

"Rest assured, sir," answered Christian, "that I shall follow your advice in all things. Ah! I ought to have mentioned that it is rumoured in the household that we are all going down to the duke's Hampshire estate of Oaklands in a few days, to remain there until the opening of Parliament in February."

"And perhaps Mr. Stanhope will be of the party," observed Redcliffe. "This is no doubt a portion of the plot, — a cunning device for the purpose of throwing the villain Stanhope and the duchess more frequently together. You must let me know when the day of departure is fixed."

"Ah, sir," Christian remarked, "the name of Oaklands must be memorable in the Marchmont family, and ominous for the welfare of the duchess."

"What do you mean?" inquired Redcliffe.

"Have you never heard, sir, of the dreadful tragedy which took place there, about eighteen years ago, and in which the name of a Duchess of Marchmont was so painfully mixed up? I was reading about it the other evening —"

"But we must take care," said Redcliffe, with that abruptness which we have before noticed as being to a certain degree characteristic of him, "that another duchess shall not be painfully associated with the name of Oaklands.

Now go, my young friend, I have business to attend to,— letters to write."

Mr. Redcliffe shook Christian warmly by the hand, and the youth thereupon took his departure.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE EMPTY HOUSE

Every day since the night of the fearful murder at the Smedleys' abode, either Bill Scott or his brother passed two or three times along Cambridge Terrace in the Regent's Park, and looked up at a particular house, but on each occasion the observer went away with the air of one who continued to be disappointed in something that he expected to take place. At length, one morning, Bill Scott beheld placards in the windows of that particular house, announcing that the stock of furniture was to be disposed of on the following day, according to the orders of the official assignee in the case of the bankruptcy of Joseph Preston. Bill Scott hastened homeward, and imparted this intelligence to the Burker.

"That's right, my boy," said Barnes, who was smoking a pipe and discussing a pot of porter at the time, "I knowed the bills couldn't be wery long afore they was posted up. But you're sure that you and your brother hav'n't dropped a word to them Smedleys about my setting you to watch that partickler house?"

"We hav'n't seen nuffin of the Smedleys ever since the business of t'other night," was Bill Scott's response, "and so we couldn't ha' talked if so be we had wished to do it, which we didn't."

"You are clever chaps, both of you," said the Burker approvingly, though the younger of his two adjutants was not present at the time to receive and acknowledge the compliment. "What a blessed thing it is for you fellers to have a chap like me which is as good as a father to you. When I think that I spent five pounds to give you each a bran-new suit of toggery, bought second-hand at an old clothes' shop, for you to turn out swell on Sundays, I'm lost in admiration at my own generosity."

"But you make us stick to the rags, though, during the veek-days," observed Bill Scott, glancing somewhat sullenly down at his dirty and tattered attire.

"Well, and don't I stick to my own seedy togs during the veek?" demanded the Burker, indignantly, and then, as if to compose his feelings, he imbibed half the contents of the pewter pot, having done which, he handed the vessel to Bill Scott. "I tell you what it is, young feller, if we was all three to turn out every day into Swell Street, it would regularly spile us for useful work. There's no gammon about the business; we hav'n't the gentility of cut that makes a chap fit for the swell mob. So we must continue to work on as we does. Look how I have blowed your hides out with good things ever since that affair of last veek; I hav'n't stinted my share of the blunt, I hope. Coffee, hot rolls, and black puddings for breakfast, roast weal or pork, or else biled beef, carrots, and taters, from the slap-bang shop for dinner, sassengers or eel-pies, and baked taters, for supper, with no end of malt and blue-ruin by way of lush. Now that's what I call living, and if the lord mayor and all his aldermen can beat it, then I'm a Dutchman, which I wery well know I ain't, 'cos why my father was a out an' out true-bred Englishman. Ah, Bill, he was a highly respectable man, — he was. I've a right to be proud of his name, and I rewere his memory. He was in the priggin' line for a matter of forty year, wisited foreign parts for the good of his country, and died there. Ah, he knowed what Botany Bay and Norfolk Island was. I tell yer what, Bill, he was like the monkey that had seen the world which you read of in the fable-book."

"And who was your mother?" asked Bill Scott. "I never heerd you speak a word about her."

"Well, she was respectable in her way, too," answered the Burker, when he had refilled and lighted his pipe. "She took in washing and stolen goods, and the latter was a precious sight more lucrative than the former. When my father got lagged — which in plain English he did, so it cost him nuffin, you understand, to go abroad and see the world — "

"Well, when he was lagged, what then?" asked Bill Scott.

"Why, my mother took on so that what with gin and grief she turned up her toes one fine morning, and the parish was so uncommon kind and had such a respect for her memory that it purvided her with a funeral free gratis for nuffin. But my grandfather — he was the chap, Bill. He could turn his hand to anythink. I've heerd my father sit for hours and speak in admiration of his father afore him. That was the great Mr. Barnes, that was — the pride of the family. He was a horse-stealer."

"And a wery good thing too," said Bill Scott.

"Yes, but that warn't all. He was a coiner into the bargain," continued Barney the Burker, as he thus eulogized his ancestors, "and what's more, he was the smasher of his own manufactured blunt. When times was bad in that way, and the markets got glutted with base coin, he took to another perfession. That was thimble-rigging, and he thought nuffin of making his ten-pun' note in a day at a country fair or market, or on a race-course. And then he was a perfect genelman in his habits, went to bed drunk every night of his life as reglar as clockwork."

"And how did he end?" asked Bill Scott.

"As a genelman should," responded the Burker; "he went out of this life in the least possible space of time when St. Sepulchre's clock struck eight one serene morning in May, and he didn't struggle more than half a minute as he danced on nuffin in the presence of five thousand genelmen and ladies which had collected together to do him honour. Now that's what I call being a great man, and I may be excoosed if I appear raything wain of that ancestor of mine, the great Mr. Barnes."

"Ah, I should raything think so," said Bill Scott, admiringly.

"Why, you see," continued the Burker, as he smoked his pipe in a leisurely manner, "it's the natur' of human beings to be proud of their ancestors. Wasn't we reading in a veekly paper t'other day that there's some great dukes — I forget their names again — which is as proud as peacocks 'cos why their great, great, great-grandmothers was what they call ladies of easy wirtue in the time of King Charles. So with the glorious example of the aristocracy afore my eyes, I may be allowed, I hope, to have a nat'ral pride in my own ancestors."

"To be sure," said Bill Scott, approvingly, "but perhaps you will tell me why you've sent either me or Tim every day for the last week up into the Regent's Park to have a look whether the furnitur' is still in that there house, or whether there's bills up to say it's all to be sold by auction."

"'Cos why it come to my knowledge — never mind how," answered the Burker, "that the chap which used to live in that house was made a bankrupt some time ago, and so I knowed wery well that as the things wasn't yet sold off, they would be soon, and that's the reason I set you fellers to watch and see."

"Well, but what has all that got to do with you?" asked Bill Scott. "I suppose you ain't a-going to take the house and set up in business as a genelman."

"No, I ain't a-going to retire from my perfession yet awhile," answered the Burker. "I haven't made my fortune."

"But you got a jolly lot of swag t'other night, though," observed the youthful thief, — "a matter of a hundred and twenty pounds for yourself. Them Smedleys ought to have let me and Tim go shears."

"Not a bit on't," said the Burker, sternly. "You wos only sarving an apprenticeship on that particklar night, and we ought to thank the Smedleys and old Mother Webber that they didn't make me fork out summat on your account as a premium on your indenturs'."

"Now, do you know what I would have done if I'd been you?" asked Bill Scott, after a pause.

"How can I know unless you tell me? What?"

"I'd have kept the whole of that there swag for myself," returned the youth, with dogged dryness; "I'd have stuck to the blunt, s'elp me tater."

"Then you would have done a thing which would have kivered you with shame and disgrace," rejoined the Burker, with a tone and look of surly indignation. "Haven't you larned that wery excellent maxim, 'Honour amung thieves?' If not, I had better punch it into your great thick head at once," and Barney looked very much as if he intended to suit the action to the word.

"Come, none of that," exclaimed Scott, shrinking back in terror at the ferocious ruffian. "I didn't mean no harm."

"Then don't go for to start such immoral notions again," said Mr. Barnes, sternly, and contenting himself with this warning, he spared his youthful and delectable pupil the punching process that had been menaced.

"You haven't told me what you mean to do about that there house on Cambridge Terrace," said Bill Scott, after another pause.

"And what's more, I don't mean to tell you," answered the Burker. "It's a little private business of my own, and you had better not go and blab about it, or I should precious soon sarve you as I did that chap down at the Smedleys' t'other night. You and Tim can amuse yourselves with cards or dominoes and a pot of porter after supper tomorrow night, till I come home, for I des say I shall have to be out an hour or two. You have had a veek's holiday, and you and Tim must get to business to-morrow. The blunt I got t'other night won't last for ever, and we must make hay while the sun shines."

It is not however necessary to record any more of the conversation which took place, on this particular occasion, between Barney the Burker and his worthy pupil, for we must pass on to the narration of other matters.

On the following day the sale took place at the house which Joseph Preston had inhabited on Cambridge Terrace, and by eight o'clock in the evening all the "lots" were cleared away, according to the terms duly specified in the catalogue, of which Barney the Burker had obtained a copy, so that he might judge whether the house would be left empty after the sale.

It was between ten and eleven o'clock at night that the ruffian issued from his lodgings, where he left the brothers Scott engaged in the manner which he had sketched forth on the preceding day. Barnes directed his steps toward the Regent's Park, and on arriving in the vicinage of Cambridge Terrace, he carefully scrutinized all the windows of the house where the sale had been. No lights were to be seen anywhere in the front, and Barney, passing around to the back of the terrace, examined the premises from that point. The result was the same; not a single light was visible in any of the windows. A bill was posted against the stable doors, and by the light of an adjacent lamp, Barney was enabled to read the large print thereon. It announced that the house was to be let on lease, applications to be made to an auctioneer in Albany Street, or else to the official assignee under Joseph Preston's bankruptcy.

"That's all right," said the Burker to himself; "applications isn't to be made upon the premises, and that's a sign there's nobody left in charge of 'em. Sharp feller, that assignee. If once you puts a man and his wife into a house to show it, and lets 'em live there free gratis for nothin' until it's let, I'm blowed if it will ever let at all. They are sure to stall off the ladies and genelmen as comes to look at it, by saying the dreanage is bad. That's a rule as inwariable as a judge pumping up his tears when he sentences a feller to death."

While making these very intellectual and erudite reflections, Barney the Burker was slowly passing away from the vicinage of the stables in order that he might have another look at the front part of the house, so as fully to make up his mind as to the particular point in which he should attempt an entry, for such was the object he had in view. It did not, however, appear very safe to operate on the front, because the shadow of a policeman was descried at the farther end of the terrace, and carriages were ever and anon proceeding in both directions, probably on account of soirées or parties being given at some of the adjacent dwellings. But on the other hand, the Burker had an almost equal objection to the attempt of a forcible entry by the rear of the premises, inasmuch as belated grooms connected with the adjoining stables might be about. So Barney went and took a walk in some secluded portion of the Regent's Park, to reflect upon the most prudential course to be pursued under existing circumstances, and likewise to while away the time until a later hour, when the carriages should have ceased to roll and the belated grooms should have retired to rest.

The church clock in Albany Street had proclaimed the hour of one in the morning, as Barney the Burker retraced his way to the rear of the premises, where he had decided upon making the attempt. The coast was clear, and a small crowbar, dexterously as well as powerfully used, speedily forced open the door of the coach-house. Entering that place, he carefully closed and bolted the door behind him. One of his capacious pockets furnished a dark lantern; this was quickly lighted by means of matches, with which he was also provided, and he now took a survey of the premises. The stables were behind the coach-house, and thence there was no means of ingress to the yard or little garden, whichever it might be, in the rear of the empty house itself. He ascended a ladder into the upper story, which he found to be divided into two compartments, — one serving as a hay-loft, the other as a chamber for a groom or a coachman, and in this chamber there was a window looking into the yard which lay between the stabling premises and the back of the house itself.

The dark lantern was reconsigned to the Burker's pocket; he carefully and noiselessly opened the window, and by means of a rope which he likewise had with him lowered himself down into the yard. Creeping cautiously along the shade of the wall which separated that yard from the adjoining one, so that no light from the back windows of the neighbouring dwellings should reveal his form to any one who might chance to be looking forth from his bedchamber, Barnes reached the back door of the house, and this he opened by means of his crowbar, with but little difficulty and loss of time. He was now inside the house; his entry had been successfully and rapidly accomplished. He listened with suspended breath, for notwithstanding the inference he had so shrewdly drawn from the announcements of the printed placard, he knew it was still within the range of possibility that there might be some person left in charge of the premises. But all appeared to be as silent as the tomb.

"Let me see," thought the Burker to himself, "the front bedroom on the second floor. Them was the words."

He accordingly began to ascend the staircase in as noiseless a manner as possible, pausing every now and then to assure himself that all continued still. In a few minutes he reached the particular room which he sought, but we should observe that from time to time he drew forth his dark lantern and threw the light around for a moment, so as to make himself thoroughly aware of the topography of the premises.

The house was completely denuded of all its furniture, and occasionally the naked boards of the staircases and the landings creaked beneath the Burker's tread. Still no other sounds reached his ears, and he felt tolerably well assured that he was the only human being at that moment inside the building. He reached, as we have said, the chamber which he sought; again his lantern was produced, but he was cautious where he threw the light, for fear lest it should be observed outside by the policeman on his beat. The shutters were however closed, and thus there was less danger of the rays penetrating forth. Barney held the lantern low down, and in such a manner that its light fell only upon the floor. Then he counted the boards from the left-hand side, until he had numbered eleven, and there he stopped. Drawing a brad-awl from his pocket, he stuck it as deep into the wood as the force of his hand could drive it without making any noise, and it served as a handle to lift up the plank, which was previously so firm and secure in its setting that no one, by merely treading over it, would by its oscillation or yielding have been led to suspect it was thus movable. The cross-beams formed so many different recesses, and these the Burker examined one after the other. But his countenance grew more and more blank, or, rather, expressive of a sullen, savage disappointment, as he found nothing.

"Well, I'm blowed," he said to himself, "if this isn't odd. One of three things must have happened. Either the chap lied in his letter, or else the Smedleys have been aforehand with me, or else the men which conducted the sale must have twigged the secret of the plank and got possession of what I'm searching arter."

But still fancying that he might have overlooked the object for which he had come, and which had cost him so much trouble, the Burker made a more careful scrutiny of the various recesses revealed by the extracted plank. Into each recess did he throw the light of his lantern; he thrust his hand in, and felt as far as he could reach on either side underneath the boards which still remained fastened down. For more than a quarter of an hour was he thus engaged, but he found nothing. With a low but terrible imprecation, he was compelled to give up the search, and without taking the trouble to restore the plank to its place, he issued from the chamber.

Descending the stairs as noiselessly as he had mounted them, he reached the hall, and on arriving there, he took out his lantern to throw a light around, for he had forgotten the precise geography of the place.

"Ah!" he ejaculated, as the beams fell upon the front door, "this is precious odd."

The Burker's surprise may be accounted for, when we inform the reader that the lantern had suddenly made him aware that the chain of the front door was hanging down, and that the lock had been wrenched off. He examined the door still more carefully; the bolts were drawn back, and it was only kept closed by the tightness with which it fitted into its setting.

"It's as clear as daylight," said the Burker to himself, with a deep concentration of fierce and savage feeling, "that some folks has been aforehand with me, and who could it be if not them Smedleys? Well, if this isn't a dirty shabby trick, I'm blowed!"

The respectable Mr. Barnes did not reflect that he on his side had been all along endeavouring to outwit the Smedleys in the object for which he himself had come, or at least that he had kept his design altogether secret from them. He considered himself deeply wronged, and hence that expression of his injured feelings.

"But how the deuce did they get in?" he said to himself, perfectly bewildered. "That they went out of this here door — if it was raly them — is as plain as a pikestaff, but how did they get in first of all? They didn't force the door. The lock was broken off by some one inside, where I'm standing now. Ah, I can guess!" he ejaculated to himself, as a sudden light flashed in unto his mind. "They must have hid theirselves inside the house arter the sale, — perhaps in the coal-cellar, or what-not. A deuced clever trick, by jingo! But I will see if I can't be even with them yet."

His angry feelings were the least thing appeased by the resolution to which he had just arrived, and returning the dark lantern to his pocket, he issued forth from the front door, closing it behind him by the aid of the brass handle, and hurried away, unseen by a single soul.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE TWO NEIGHBOURING HOUSES

In one of the finest streets at the West End of the town — but the name of which we suppress for reasons which will be presently obvious — there are an elegant milliner's establishment and a handsome tailor's shop next door to each other. The two houses, which are lofty, spacious, and of imposing appearance, belong to a uniform range, the white fronts and large windows of which, as well as the general style of architecture, produce the impression which is conveyed by the best streets of Paris.

Through the immense panes of plate glass in the milliner's shop may be seen an exquisite and elegant assortment of caps, bonnets, laces, veils, ribbons, silks, etc., and the *facia* over the shop front indicates that the establishment belongs to Madame Angelique. The same name is repeated, but in miniature letters, on a brass plate on the shop door. The exterior would lead the passer-by to imagine that a respectable as well as a thriving business is carried on by Madame Angelique, and everything seems to be done to render the appearance of the shop as imposing and as attractive as possible. Nowhere are the windows more transparently clean, nowhere the paint fresher, nowhere the brasswork on the lower part of the window and on the door so brilliantly resplendent. If you enter the establishment, the impression produced by the exterior is sustained and confirmed. The shelves are arranged with neat drab-coloured pasteboard boxes, edged with pink, and which are speedily taken down to display their exquisite contents of laces or costly silks, their caps or their gloves, their trimmings or artificial flowers, to the eyes of customers. The mahogany counter is scrupulously burnished, the chairs have crimson cushions, and in the evening the shop is a blaze of gaslight. Sometimes it is Madame Angelique herself who attends upon her lady customers; at other times it is a genteel-looking deputy of a certain age, and who speaks French with the finest Parisian accent, but English with scarcely any describable accent at all. A glass door at the extremity of the spacious shop frequently stands half-open, and reveals some dozen of workwomen in a large room comfortably furnished, and where dresses are made up or caps and bonnets trimmed. A very handsome circular staircase, with bronze balustrades. and carpeted all over, leads up into the show-rooms, which occupy the whole of the first floor. These are sumptuously furnished; lustres, vases, and ormolu clocks embellish the marble mantelpieces, and are reflected in the immense mirrors with their massive gilt frames. Splendid chandeliers, all of the finest cut glass, hang to the ceiling, and these at dusk are lighted with wax candles, which flood the apartments with as brilliant a lustre as that which prevails in a West End saloon when a banquet or ball is given. The carpets in the show-rooms are so thick that the delicate feet of lady visitresses are completely lost in them; the patterns are of the richest description, and match well with the deep crimson paper of the walls and the general style of the furniture. The costliest as well as the most elegant dresses are to be seen in these apartments, and whichever way a visitress may turn, she finds her form reflected either in a mirror against the wall, or in an immense oval psyche. There are few chairs in these rooms, but numbers of sumptuous ottomans, covered with velvet, are ranged around. These ottomans are so many large chests or boxes, the lids of which are made to lift up, cushion and all, and from the mysterious depths of the interior Madame Angelique or the show women produce the newest elegancies of Parisian fashion, — such as bonnets, caps, and materials for ladies' dresses.

The show women themselves are middle-aged persons, but dressed with the utmost taste and neatness, of affable and obliging manners, and bearing the stamp of unquestionable respectability. Neither in the shop down-stairs, nor in the show-rooms, are any of the females very young or very good-looking; so that if a somewhat particular lady, or an uxorious husband accompanying his wife, pay a visit to Madame Angelique's establishment, nothing meets the eye to induce a suspicion as to its perfect propriety. We should add that the young women themselves in the work-room seem to have been chosen as much for their absence of personal charms as, we may suppose, for their skilfulness with the needle, and perhaps the door of communication between that room and the shop is intentionally left open, to convince such straight-laced lady or particular husband accompanying his wife, as those whom we have alluded to, that in every possible department of Madame Angelique's business the females employed are of modest demeanour, as well as of an age and appearance which may defy the breath of scandal.

But then, Madame Angelique's house is a very large one, and there are floors higher than the show-rooms. Most of Madame Angelique's customers know that she is a widow, and that only two or three of her principal dependents live on the premises. What, then, does she do with all the upper part of her spacious house? If occasionally some curious old dowager or ingenuous young lady happens to put the question, Madame Angelique, with one of her most amiable smiles, speaks of the immense stock of goods which she is constantly compelled to keep on hand, and thus promptly attributes a use and a purpose to all the up-stairs rooms which are not occupied by herself, her principal women, and her domestics. In short, the establishment of which we are speaking has the appearance and the general reputation of being one of the most respectable, as it is assuredly one of the most fashionable and best frequented, *magasins des modes* to be found at the West End of London.

Before we pass away to a description of her neighbours, we must say a few words of Madame Angelique herself. She is about fifty years of age, of a comely and matronly appearance. She is a French woman, as her name, her manners, and her speech indicate. Somewhat stout, she is nevertheless bustling and active, and she thinks no trouble too great to bestow upon a customer. Indeed, her bearing is as urbane, her smile as complacent, and the expressions of her gratitude as great, toward a lady who merely drops in to buy a three and sixpenny ribbon or a half-guinea cap, as they are to another customer who leaves behind an order for a twenty-guinea dress. There is nothing obtrusive in her politeness; it is measured to the utmost nicety. She will only press her goods to a certain point, and no farther; she will expatiate upon how much this or that article is sure to become the complexion of the particular customer with whom she is treating at the time, but she will not too persuasively force the said articles upon such customer. Thus she gives universal satisfaction, and as for her bills, she only sends them in once a year, about three months after Christmas, remaining perfectly satisfied if they be liquidated any time before the ensuing Christmas. It were almost needless to add that she herself dresses with the most unexceptionable taste, in a manner becoming to her years, with the slightest dash of a Parisian coquetry, but yet so far removed from being outré that it is impossible to make her look ridiculous. She uses rouge and pearl-powder with so much skill that only those ladies who are equally skilful in the mysteries of the toilet could discern how much her complexion is indebted to those accessories; and her smile reveals so admirable a set of teeth that even the wearers of false ones themselves would find it difficult to attribute Madame Angelique's to the succedaneous art of a renowned dentist in the same street.

The tailor's shop next door is as handsome in its own way as the *magasin* of Madame Angelique. It is the establishment of no cheap clothier; none of the exquisitely fashioned articles of raiment displayed in the window are vulgarized by ticketed prices. M. Bertin — for the tailor is a Frenchman, as Madame Angelique is a Frenchwoman — would scorn the idea of selling pantaloons at sixteen shillings, surtouts at two guineas, and paletots at two ten. No suit of clothes is sent out from his establishment under seven guineas. His name is in gilt letters over the shop front, in brass letters ingeniously stuck on to the middle pane of plate glass, and repeated on a brass plate on the shop door. Everything looks businesslike and respectable, — yes, and wealthy also, at M. Bertin's; and if a passer-by glances up at the windows on the drawing-room or higher floors he beholds rich draperies and the tops of gilt back chairs, all indicative of the sumptuous interior of M. Bertin's habitation. As for M. Bertin himself, he is a short, middle-aged man, very active and very obsequious, tolerably good-looking for his years, exquisitely dressed, making a large display of watch-chain festooning over his waistcoat, of diamond studs to the cambric front of his shirt, and of rings upon his fingers. He speaks English tolerably well, but with a strong accent, and as he is amassing a fortune in this country, he loves it ten thousand times better than his own.

It was about nine o'clock in the evening that the Duke of Marchmont strolled into M. Bertin's shop, which, as well as his neighbour's, was brilliantly lighted with gas, and after exchanging a few words of little moment with the foreman who was behind the counter, his Grace passed through a side door into the private passage. He ascended the staircase with the air of one who was perfectly well acquainted with the geography of the premises, and who felt himself perfectly at home in this proceeding. Mounting to the second floor, he tapped gently at a door, which was immediately opened by a middle-aged and discreet-looking female domestic.

"The young ladies there, Annette?" inquired the duke, with a significant glance thrown across the room into which the door opened.

"Yes, my lord," was the woman's response.

"Disengaged?"

"Yes, my lord."

Without another word, Annette led the way across the room, which was handsomely furnished, and advanced straight up to a large mirror which seemed to be suspended in the usual manner against the solid wall, though reaching down to the carpet. It was however in reality a door, which opened by means of a secret spring, and the woman tapped at what appeared to be the back part of a closet thus revealed. That woodwork against which she knocked was speedily opened in the form of another door; the woman stood aside, and the duke passed in to the place whither these singular and mysterious means of communication led. A beautiful girl, elegantly dressed, held that inner door open to afford the duke admission, and when he had entered, she closed it again. It was an immense mirror, suspended like the one in the room from which he had emerged, and when the door which it formed was shut, no one, unless in the secret, could have possibly entertained the slightest suspicion that it was a door at all.

The reader has perhaps by this time comprehended that the Duke of Marchmont had passed from the tailor's house into the milliner's; or if there be any such reader so obtuse of intellect as not to comprehend this fact, we now beg to announce it. Yes, his Grace of Marchmont was in one of the higher rooms of Madame Angelique's abode. It was splendidly furnished, with mirrors, draperies, pictures, and statues. But these were the least attractions there, in comparison with four lovely beings in female shape, who seemed to be the presiding deities of this luxurious apartment. One had opened the mysterious door, as already stated, to give the duke admission. She was a fine, well-grown, and exceedingly handsome young woman, of about two and twenty. Her glossy brown hair was arranged in bands, with an artificial flower like a camellia on one side of the head. Her dress, of fawn-coloured satin, was made very low in the body, revealing a gorgeous bust; the richest lace trimmed the upper part of the corsage, both back and front, and ribbons depended from the shoulders. Her arms were bare, and splendid arms they were, — a trifle too robust perhaps for statue-like symmetry, but plump, well rounded, and dazzlingly white. This young woman was a native of England, and she was known to the Duke of Marchmont, as well as perhaps to others, by the Christian name of Lettice, this being short for Letitia.

The second divinity of the place whom we must notice was a French girl, named Armantine, and who was of ravishing loveliness. Her features were delicately formed and faultlessly regular. Her hair, a shade darker than the English girl's, was arranged in a sort of Greek knot, and it shone with a rich gloss, all its own. She too was elegantly apparelled, — the light satin dress setting off the slender symmetry of her shape, and revealing much of the well-formed bust, which was less exuberant and more statuesque than the voluptuous contours of Miss Lettice.

The third female occupant of the room was a German girl, with masses of rich auburn hair clustering down upon her brilliantly white neck and shoulders. She too was eminently beautiful, but with a sensuously outlined profile, and large, languishing blue eyes. Her figure combined slenderness of shape with rich development of contours. Of the four she alone had not her arms bare; not that she had any reason to conceal them on account of defective modelling: it was simply a matter of taste that she wore the elegant Parisian sleeves which at that time had just come into fashion. This German beauty was known to the Duke of Marchmont by the Christian name of Linda.

The fourth was a charming Irish girl, with mischievous eyes and piquant features, — the dewy lips expressive of much feeling, and the form combining elegance of symmetry with lithe and willowy grace. She answered to the name of Eveleen. And now we may add, in respect to all four that they possessed teeth white as pearls, and that in this respect, if an apple of discord had been thrown amongst them, no Trojan umpire could have honestly and conscientiously awarded it to any one in particular. In short, Lettice, Armantine, Linda, and Eveleen were assuredly four of the loveliest specimens of the female sex that could possibly be found grouped together in the same apartment.

That the Duke of Marchmont was no stranger to them was evident by the manner in which they greeted him on his arrival. The restraint which his rank might elsewhere have imposed was here altogether lost sight of, as will be seen from the way in which the young females respectively addressed him.

"Is it you, my dear Marchmont?" exclaimed Lettice, the English woman, as she gave him admittance by means of the mysterious mirror-contrived doorway, and she spoke in a rich flutelike voice, which seemed quite appropriate to the fine, well-developed, and imposing style of her beauty.

"That wicked Marchmont, who always makes me drink so much champagne," exclaimed Mademoiselle Armantine, who spoke English with only just so much of a foreign accent as to render it interesting when floating on her soft, silvery tones.

"It is just why Marchmont is welcome," said Linda, the German girl, who also spoke English well, "because he is sure to give us champagne."

"Hold your tongues, you selfish creatures," cried Eveleen, the Irish girl, with that interesting intonation of voice which gives such a peculiar charm to the Hibernian accent upon the lip of a well-bred daughter of the Emerald Isle. "Let us welcome him in another way," and with sportive joyousness she wound her arms about the duke's neck, at the same time kissing him upon either cheek.

"Oh, if that is the sort of welcome you have in store for me," said Marchmont, "pray let it be given at once."

Thereupon Miss Lettice folded him in her embrace; Mademoiselle Armantine was the next to dispense her caresses, and though the German girl came last, yet she held him longest in her arms.

"And now, my fair ones," exclaimed the duke, laughing with the air of a man who purposely sought this kind of society for the purpose of escaping from more serious, and perhaps unpleasant reflections, "let us have champagne and fruit, and we will pass a merry evening together. But first of all I must have a few words with Madame Angelique, and in private too. I have something of importance to speak to her about."

"You know where to find her," said Lettice; "she is in her own room at this moment. Go quick, Marchmont, and if you remain too long, we will all four come in a body, armed with champagne-bottles, and with forced fruit as missiles, to drive you back as our captive."

"Chains of festooning flowers should not be omitted from the implements of your coercion," answered the duke, forcing himself to speak in a gay manner, though, as he opened a door opposite the mysteriously contrived mirror, he could scarcely keep back a sigh which rose up into his very throat.

Closing the door behind him, he traversed the well-carpeted passage, and tapped at another door on the same story. The well-known voice of Madame Angelique bade him enter, and he found her seated at table with none other than her neighbour M. Bertin. There was an exquisite supper upon the table, — a repast consisting of succulent French delicacies, served up on silver plate, and flanked with bottles of champagne, Burgundy, and Bordeaux. The room was a small one, but furnished in the most luxurious manner. It was madame's boudoir, and a door facing the one by which the duke had entered communicated with her bedchamber. M. Bertin rose and bowed obsequiously, but Madame Angelique contented herself with a half-courteous, half-familiar smile, at the same time indicating a chair.

"I am sorry to disturb you, my dear madam, in the midst of so agreeable a *tête-à-tête*," said the duke, speaking in the French tongue, with which he was perfectly conversant, " but I have some business of importance to discuss with you. Shall I return presently? "

" By no means, my lord," answered Madame Angelique, in a most gracious manner, for she doubtless well knew that the duke's gold would indemnify her well for any little inconvenience she might experience on the score of the delicacies of the supper-table getting cold.

" And it just happens," said the discreet and obsequious M. Bertin, " that I have a couple of letters to write — "

" Which need not take you more than a quarter of an hour," observed the duke, thus indicating the interval that he wished the tailor to remain absent from the milliner's boudoir.

M. Bertin bowed and withdrew, but so far from returning into his own house, or having any letters at all to write, he merely lounged away the prescribed quarter of an hour in an adjoining room. Meanwhile let us see what took place between the Duke of Marchmont and Madame Angelique.

" I believe, my excellent friend," said his Grace, " that you make all my wife's dresses? "

" I have for some years enjoyed the honour of her Grace's patronage," was the milliner's response.

" And mine, too, for that matter," exclaimed the duke, with a laugh. " But joking apart, have you made any dresses for her Grace recently? "

" At this very moment, my lord," answered Madame Angelique, " I have three or four in hand for the Duchess of Marchmont."

" Good," ejaculated the duke. " Of course you can make duplicates? "

" Make duplicates, my lord," cried the milliner, with a most genuine amazement.

" To be sure. Why not? "

" Oh, of course, if your Grace wishes it, I could make a dozen of precisely the same sort."

" Never mind the dozen," rejoined Marchmont; " a duplicate of each will answer all my purpose. But recollect, the work must be so well done and the resemblances so exact that her Grace's own maid, if appealed to upon the subject, could not possibly suspect that there were duplicates of her mistress's raiment."

" All this can be done, my lord," replied Madame Angelique, " and without for a single moment attempting to pry impertinently into your Grace's reasons and objects, pardon me for expressing a hope that no evil consequences will redound to myself."

"I will take care of that," answered the duke. "When will these dresses be ready?"

"Her Grace tells me, my lord, that you are all going into the country the day after to-morrow, and the dresses which her Grace has ordered must consequently be sent home to-morrow night."

"And when can the counterparts be in readiness?" inquired Marchmont.

"It will take a good week, my lord —"

"A week? nonsense!" ejaculated Marchmont.

"I cannot possibly get them done in less time. Say on the sixth evening hence," added Madame Angelique, after a little reflection.

"Very good," replied the duke; "that must suffice."

"They shall be positively at Marchmont House by nine o'clock on the day named —"

"No, you must not send them direct to Marchmont House," exclaimed the duke; "that will never do. There must be no trace — But how can it be managed?"

"Shall I forward the dresses in a box to Oaklands, my lord?" asked the milliner.

"A box so light as that will be with nothing but woman's trumpery in it would seem suspicious if addressed to me. And then, too, it is absolutely necessary for my purpose that there should exist no possible clue — Ah, I recollect, I have an unsophisticated, unsuspicious, docile, and obedient young man in my service. Let me see? this is Wednesday. Well, on Tuesday evening next, at nine o'clock, this young man shall be in a cab at the door, and you must have the dresses delivered to him in a box by one of your most confidential women."

"They are all confidential, my lord," responded Madame Angelique, "or else I should not have been able to sustain my establishment unsuspected as I have done for so many years."

"Well, let this be the arrangement, then," resumed Marchmont. "At the hour and on the evening just agreed to, the name of Christian Ashton will be sent in to you, and you will know what it means. But mind! he is not to know what the dresses are."

"Decidedly not, my lord," exclaimed the milliner. "Your Grace's commands shall be followed in every respect. Has your Grace any further instructions?"

"Yes, there is one thing more," proceeded the duke. "You will have to spare Lettice Rodney for a short time. I need her services. Do you consent? You know very well that you will be paid handsomely for all that you do to serve me."

"Your Grace can command in my house as well as if it were your own," responded Madame Angelique.

"Good," said Marchmont. "Then I will make my own arrangements with Lettice. You are convinced that she is perfectly trustworthy, that she is one to whom may be confided a task of no ordinary importance? Remember, she will be well paid, as you yourself will be — "

"I can rely upon her," exclaimed Madame Angelique. "Has she not been with me since she was fifteen? Does she not regard me as her own mother? Have I not done everything for her?"

"To be sure, to be sure!" ejaculated the duke. "But I have often wondered what the deuce you do with the girls when they begin to fade away and are wearing out."

"I give them money and send them abroad," answered the milliner. "Ah, your Grace little thinks how many I have supplied to a house in Paris. Change of air soon brings them around a bit, and they go on well for a few years in France, until at length they get down into the streets and end by dying in the hospitals. But what else can they expect?"

"What else indeed?" said the duke, and with this heartless assent to the vile woman's observation, he rose from his seat.

"By the bye, my lord," cried Madame Angelique, beckoning his Grace toward her with an air of mysterious confidence, "I have found out such an extraordinary thing. One of my spies — and your Grace knows that I always have several upon the lookout — "

"Well, what is it?" asked the duke. "Something new in the female line?"

"Something new indeed, my lord, if it is possible to get hold of them by any sort of inveigling — "

"Them?" cried the duke. "You speak of more than one."

"I speak of two, my lord," answered Madame Angelique. "It is just this: in a certain suburb of London there lives an Eastern lady of the most ravishing beauty, and she has in her household a Hindu woman as grandly handsome as herself, though of a different style. I have seen them both. They ride out occasionally in a carriage in their own neighbourhood, though for the most part they live quietly and unostentatiously, and what on earth they are doing in England, I cannot tell. The worst of it is, there are English servants in the establishment — "

"The best of it, you mean," ejaculated the duke, "because you can easily bribe those English servants to your purposes."

"I fear not, my lord. My confidential agent," continued Madame Angelique, "who first told me of these rare Oriental exotics, endeavoured to sound the steward or butler, or whatever he is, and he met with such a cold reception that it would not do to attempt anything farther through those means. Not that I despair of getting these Orientals by some means or another into my power, only of course I should run a great risk — "

"Which is as much as to give me to understand," interrupted Marchmont, with a smile, "that the reward must be commensurate. Well, my dear Madame Angelique, do not speak a syllable upon this subject to any others of your patrons, but prosecute your inquiries, prepare your plans, spread your nets, and wait till I return from Oaklands. You know that I can be liberal — "

"Your Grace's commands in this respect, as in all others, shall be paramount with me."

"Ah, by the bye," said the duke, "I had better give you a trifle on account of the affair of the dresses. How much have you there?" he asked, as he tossed a handful of banknotes into the milliner's lap.

"Two hundred pounds exactly, my lord," was the response. "My best gratitude — "

"Oh, never mind the gratitude," cried Marchmont. "And now good night. I am going to pass a few hours with the young ladies. I have ordered champagne and other refreshments — ".

"Splendid forced fruit from Covent Garden to-day, my lord," said Madame Angelique. "Melons, pineapples, grapes — "

"Well, send up all you have got. And now I hope you will amuse yourself with our worthy friend Bertin, who is discretion personified. I am sure if it were not for you two, I don't know what gentlemen and ladies having pretty little intrigues to carry on could possibly do."

"Well, my lord, I do flatter myself that neighbour Bertin and I carry on the business with a discretion that is unparalleled. But then," continued the milliner, "so long as we have such excellent patrons as your Grace, we are rewarded for our trouble and anxiety."

The duke smiled at the thought of Madame Angelique's anxiety as he glanced at the well-spread table, and nodding her a familiar good night, he quitted the room. Returning to the luxuriously furnished apartment where he had left the four young ladies, he found a table spread with all kinds of wine, fruits, and other light refreshments. Nothing could be more sensuously refined than everything which met his view. The apartment flooded with light, the rich furniture, the crimson draperies, the brilliant mirrors, the wine sparkling in the decanters, the fruit in the dishes of cut glass and in china baskets, and the ravishing loveliness of the four young women who were to be his companions at the festival, — all combined to elevate his spirits and win him away from certain sombre reflections which had been hanging upon his soul ere he sought the present scene. The atmosphere of the apartment was warm and perfumed, but without a sickly oppressiveness. The brilliant light was reflected in the eyes of the four charmers; it made their teeth gleam like pearls, their lips have the vivid semblance of wet coral; it displayed the dazzling transparency of their complexions to the utmost advantage, it shed a richer gloss on their naturally shining hair.

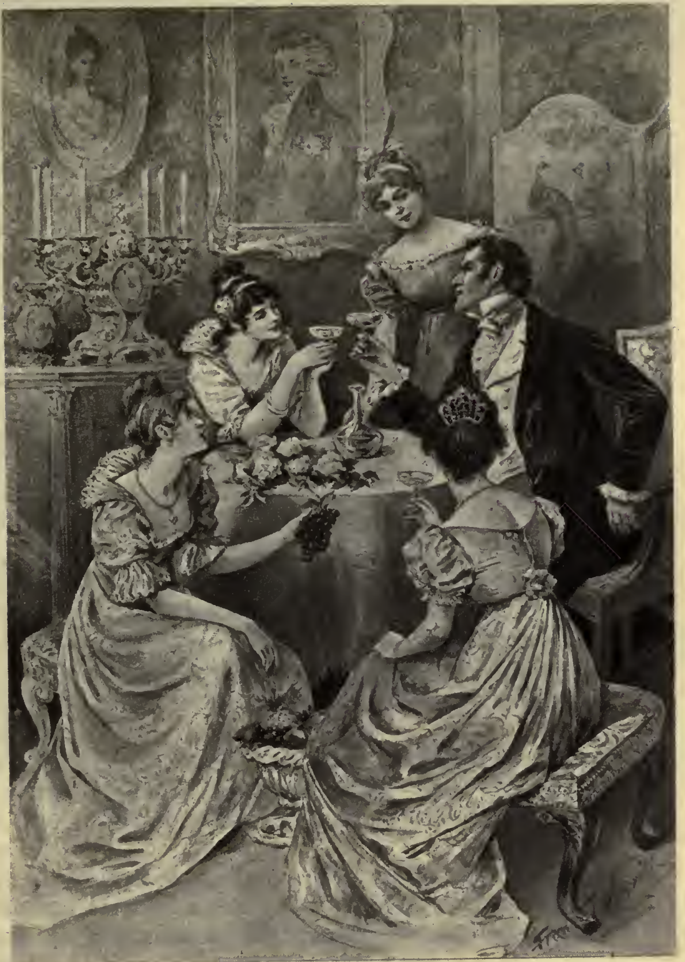
"Come, my dear Marchmont," said Lettice, "and let me sit on one side of you."

"And I," said the young Irish girl, "on the other."

"But Marchmont loves to be at his ease," cried the sprightly Armantine, and she bounded from the room, in a few minutes returning with a costly flowered silk dressing-gown, the production of which elicited peals of merry laughter from herself and her companions.

"THE CHAMPAGNE QUICKLY BEGAN TO CIRCULATE"

Photogravure from original by Merrill



"Come," said Linda, the German girl, "off with the coat and on with the dressing-gown. It makes you look so much as if you felt yourself at home."

"Have your own way," said the duke. "And now to table, you merry romps."

They sat down; the champagne quickly began to circulate, laughter pealed like silver bells around, the duke felt himself gay, he forget whatsoever cares had been troubling him, he plunged headlong as it were into the vortex of pleasure, in order to drown his recollections. Be it understood that the young women were not merely well educated, but accomplished likewise. They had belonged to genteel families, from whose bosom they were beguiled away by the infamous agents of the still more infamous Madame Angelique, and if there were at any time remorseful feelings in their souls, they were compelled to stifle them as well as they could, for they felt that they had entered upon a career whence there was no retrogression. But they were accomplished, we say; they all had good conversational powers, and the discourse became as sparkling as the wine which gave it zest. After awhile, when the whole party were exhilarated, they got up and danced, and the duke abandoned himself with a sort of wild frenzy to the hilarious proceeding. Were he a youth of eighteen or twenty, he could not have entered more completely into this fun and frolic. At length, when exhausted with waltzing and romping, he threw himself upon a chair, and the champagne glasses were filled again.

"Long live such gaiety as ours!" cried Marchmont, lifting up his glass in one hand, while the other arm encircled the splendid shape of the gorgeously handsome Lettice.

"Oh, for ever such gaiety as this," exclaimed Linda, who had likewise thrown herself upon a seat, and as she held her glass up, she watched the sparkling of the wine ere she conveyed it to her sensuously breathing lips.

"That wicked Marchmont has whirled me around so," cried the Irish girl, "that he has tired me out," and she threw herself upon a footstool.

"Moisten your lips with fruit," said Armantine, as she sped to the table, and quickly returning with a china basket containing melon, pineapple, oranges, apples, pears, and grapes, she placed it on the carpet at the duke's feet.

Then, likewise seating herself upon a footstool, she listened while Marchmont and Lettice sang together a Bacchanalian English song. What a scene of luxurious enjoyment, blended with the ravishments of feminine beauty, was that for the pencil of an artist.

It was past one in the morning when Marchmont thought of taking his departure. He placed under one of the fruit dishes a sum of money in bank-notes, as a mark of his liberality toward the charming companions of his revel, and then he drew Lettice aside into a window recess, where he conversed with her for a few minutes in a low tone of voice. The other three girls chatted together at the opposite extremity of the room; they heard not what passed between Marchmont and Lettice Rodney, neither did they seek to catch a single word. They were all on the friendliest terms with one another; they had no jealousy. Their exquisite beauty ensured to them all an equal amount of favour on the part of their aristocratic patrons, and being girls of good education, feeling too at times their lost and degraded position, they knew how useless it was to aggravate it by petty contentions amongst themselves.

The conversation between the duke and Lettice terminated; the nobleman embraced all four one after another, and then took his departure.

CHAPTER XXVIII

COVENT GARDEN

On the following day Christian Ashton was engaged, as usual, in the forenoon, attending to his ducal employer's correspondence, and when it was terminated, he rose to withdraw from the library, but Marchmont said, " Sit down again, Christian; I wish to speak to you."

The youth resumed his chair, and prepared to listen attentively to whatsoever might be addressed to him.

" I think, Christian," continued his Grace, " that you are happy and comfortable in your present situation, and that inasmuch as your welfare is looked after by me, you yourself are willing and anxious to give me every possible satisfaction."

" It is my duty, so long as I eat your Grace's bread," responded the youth, thus avoiding the necessity of telling a falsehood by the assertion that he was happy in the duke's employment.

" I expected no less from your lips," continued Marchmont. " There is a little service which you will have to render me. To-morrow I go with her Grace to Oaklands, but you will not follow until the early part of next week. You will thus have a little holiday, and plenty of opportunities to see your charming sister. Next Tuesday night at nine o'clock you will take a cab and repair to a particular address, which is written on this card," at the same time presenting one. "You will merely knock at the door and send in your own name. A large box will be given to you, of which you must take particular care. It contains things which I design as presents, and the truth is I wish to surprise those for whom the gifts are destined; hence this little degree of mystery which I am observing on the point.

You will leave London by the first coach on Wednesday morning, and you will bring the box amongst your own luggage. Put upon it a card with your own name, and when you arrive at Oaklands, let it be taken up, together with your other boxes, to the chamber which will be allotted to you there. Do you understand? "

" Perfectly, my lord," responded Christian.

" And you will see the necessity of keeping the matter profoundly secret," rejoined the duke, " because, as I tell you, I mean to divert myself a little with the distribution of the presents which the box contains. I know that I can rely on your discretion and fidelity. Mr. Calvert will provide you with the requisite funds for your travelling expenses, and you must be sure to arrive at Oaklands in the course of next Wednesday."

Christian bowed, and quitted the library. Sallying forth, he proceeded at once to Mortimer Street, Cavendish Square, and communicated to Mr. Redcliffe everything that had just taken place between himself and the duke. The address of the house at which he had to call was Madame Angelique's, and Christian having purposely passed it by in his walk up to Mrs. Macaulay's was enabled to report that it was a milliner's establishment. Neither Redcliffe nor himself for a moment believed that Marchmont's explanation of certain intended gifts was otherwise than a pretext for some ulterior design; but what this design might be, young Ashton could not for the life of him conjecture, while Mr. Redcliffe volunteered no surmise.

" You must perform exactly, my young friend," he said, " the mission that is entrusted to you, but upon obtaining possession of the box, come direct hither to me before you take it to Marchmont House. I may then tell you how we will act. Besides, it is necessary that I should see you again ere your departure for Oaklands."

Christian promised to fulfil Mr. Redcliffe's instructions, and took his leave of this gentleman. He stepped into Mrs. Macaulay's parlour to shake hands with the widow, who bade him be sure and not forget to bring his sister to take a friendly cup of tea with her on the first convenient evening. He was about to depart, when Mrs. Macaulay beckoned him back, and in a tone of mysterious confidence, she said, " By the bye, I remember I have got a little party on Saturday evening, and it's on rather a memorable occasion. The fact is, I and Mrs. Sifkin have not been on speaking terms with each other for the last ten years. Not that it was any fault of mine, you know, because I am quite incapable of giving offence even to a worm, much less a human being that walks upright on two legs. It was all owing to jealousy on Mrs. Sifkin's part. However she has made overtures through Mrs. Dumpling, a lady in the same street. She lets lodgings, too, does Mrs. Dumpling, and between you and me, wretched apartments they are. You wouldn't believe it, my dear Mr. Ashton," added Mrs. Macaulay, in a voice of awful mystery, " no, you never would believe it, but it is as true as I am a living woman."

" What's true? " asked Christian.

" Bugs, my young friend, — bugs, I can assure you," replied Mrs. Macaulay. " Nothing should induce me to say such a thing of a neighbour, if it wasn't the case. If they were fleas only, but bugs — dreadful! "

" Dreadful indeed," muttered Christian, with a sensation as if something disagreeable were creeping over him under his clothes.

" However," proceeded Mrs. Macaulay, " barring the bugs, Mrs. Dumpling is a very excellent neighbour, and a kind-hearted woman, though she does give nothing but that odious currant wine of hers and captain's biscuits, with maybe a stale tart or two, for supper when she has a little party. Still she is a good woman, and she went right across yesterday morning to Mrs. Sifkin, and told her her mind about her conduct toward me. I dare say that Mrs. Dumpling did come out rather strong, because I know that she had had a leetle drop of brandy beforehand, — in fact, it was out of a bottle that Mr. Redcliffe, poor dear soul! sent down from his room. However the long and short of it was that Mrs. Sifkin confessed the errors of her ways, and Mrs. Dumpling proposed that if Mrs. Sifkin would send me over an apology through her, I would give a party to clinch the reconciliation and celebrate the event. So I mean to do the thing nicely, and give a pretty spread on Saturday evening, and if you and your dear sister will favour me with your company, I shall be delighted."

" I cannot say how my sister may be engaged," answered Christian, " and I do not for a moment think that she will be enabled to accept your kind invitation. But as for myself, I say yes with much pleasure."

"And you will be welcome," said Mrs. Macaulay. "But pray do bring your dear sister, if she can possibly manage to come."

Christian bade the woman good-bye, and hastened on to the Regent's Park to see Christina. He had not the least intention of bringing her in contact either with the amiable Mrs. Sifkin, or with Mrs. Dumpling who had bugs in her lodgings, but he had accepted the invitation for himself, not only because he fancied that he might be dull at Marchmont House while the family was away, but also because he had some little curiosity to see how the rival lodging-house keepers would get on together.

It was about two in the afternoon of the following day that Mr. Redcliffe — enveloped in his cloak as usual, and with his hat more or less slouched over his countenance — walked slowly down that fashionable street in which the adjoining establishments of Madame Angelique and M. Bertin were situated. Having well surveyed the milliner's premises, or, rather, their exterior, Redcliffe continued his way, and if the thoughts which were passing in his mind were reduced to words, they would have taken some such shape as the following:

"The establishment seems respectable enough, but yet the fairest exterior often veils the foulest corruptions. There is some deep mystery in connection with that box which is to come next Tuesday night from this house, and I must fathom it. Every incident, however trivial it may appear, is to me of momentous import. Who knows how it may serve as a link in that chain which I am endeavouring to follow up? The link may not for the moment seem to fit, but it must not on this account be discarded. Who can tell but that it will sooner or later find its appropriate place and help me on to the accomplishment of my aim?"

While thus meditating, Clement Redcliffe pursued his way, — at first without perceiving the direction he was taking, and without any specific object in view. But suddenly he bethought himself of a poor invalid old man whose case had become known to him in his wanderings about the metropolis, and whose last few weeks in this life he was soothing with that quiet, unostentatious benevolence which he was wont to afford. The medical man whose services his purse had provided for this invalid had recommended certain little delicacies, cooling fruits, and so forth, and Redcliffe now continued his way toward Covent Garden Market, to make such purchases as under the circumstances he thought would be acceptable. Arrived in the arcade, his charitable intentions were speedily carried out, and on quitting the fruiterer's shop, he strolled up to the terrace on the roof of the market, where flowers are exhibited. Redcliffe was passionately fond of contemplating floral rarities, — a taste which was natural with his refined intelligence, and which had been strengthened by his long residence in an Oriental clime.

He was entering one of the conservatories, when he stepped back with a sudden sense of intrusion upon two individuals who were standing there in deep and earnest conversation, — a conversation so absorbing that they did not notice his presence. One was a lady the very first glance at whose appearance was sufficient to impress the beholder with an idea of rank and distinction. She was dressed with that simple elegance and exquisite refinement of taste which characterized the well-bred woman. The consciousness of high birth and the dignity of position blended sweetly and harmoniously with the perfect loveliness of her countenance and the flowing outlines of her symmetrical shape. Her features, perfect in their profile, had that classic sculptural finish which is so seldom seen; she was a creature of a magnificent beauty, — a beauty that fascinated more than it dazzled, and enthralled the soul more than it bewildered the imagination. Her age was about three and twenty; she was tall, with a shape of full developed contours, and yet faultlessly symmetrical in the tapering slenderness of the waist. Her hair was of the richest auburn, flowing in glossy lustrous tresses from beneath the elegant Parisian bonnet. Her eyes, of the clearest blue, were large and darkly fringed, the brows delicately pencilled and beautifully arched. One hand had the glove off, — a small white delicate hand it was too, and one of the tapering fingers wore the wedding-ring.

Her companion, who held that beautiful hand tenderly pressed between both his own, was a young man of perfect masculine beauty. He might have been about her own age, and his appearance indicated a distinguished position, as we have already said that hers likewise did. But that he was not her husband, Clement Redcliffe saw at a glance, for though they were unconscious of his presence, yet there was something evidently stealthy in their meeting at that place. No husband would have held her hand as he did; no wife in the presence of a husband would have worn that expression which was visible in her deep blue brooding eyes, and in the passion-breathing lips, which, slightly apart, afforded a glimpse of the pearls within. And he was speaking in a low, murmuring voice, but with a tender persuasiveness of the look, as if he were pleading a cause whose only argument was love, and to which she could not yield with honour to herself. The rising and sinking of the shawl folded over her full and swelling bust denoted the agitation which reigned in her heart; though she stood otherwise perfectly still and motionless, with that fair white hand abandoned to her lover, and with the colour coming and going rapidly upon her beautiful damask cheeks.

Such was the spectacle which Clement Redcliffe beheld almost at the first glance, or at least within the few moments which he lingered upon the threshold of the conservatory. The man who had charge thereof was attending to a customer at a little distance on the terrace; that tender pair evidently thought themselves altogether alone and unperceived, snatching perhaps the quick stolen interview of a few minutes, but these few minutes constituting a period in which a whole world of heart's feelings became mutually expressed. Redcliffe caught the words, "Madame Angelique" and "M. Bertin," amidst the otherwise inaudible murmurings of the young man's voice, — inaudible however only to him, for the lady was evidently drinking in with mingled hope and fear — love's passion and alarm — every syllable that came from her companion's lips. Redcliffe turned abruptly away, but glancing through the glass of the conservatory, he saw that the tender couple still remained in precisely the same position, and that so far from their being startled by that movement on his part, his presence had continued utterly unperceived.

"That scene is but too intelligible," he thought to himself, as he proceeded to the conservatory at the other end of the terrace. "There is a young wife not yet lost, but hovering upon the very verge of perdition, her love getting the better of her sense of duty, the enamoured tempter's persuasiveness proving stronger than her prudence. Would that I dared step between them to save her, and strengthen that lingering virtue which required so much tender pleading on his part to have its last barriers broken down. But no; it is not for me to intervene. There are good deeds which a philanthropist would fain perform, but which, as the world goes, he dares not even approach."

Then it struck Redcliffe as singular that at a moment when he had so little expected to hear it, the name of Madame Angelique should have been mentioned, and coupled too with that of the very person whom he had ere now noticed to be her neighbour. Was it possible that the young man was proposing an assignation, for the carrying out of which the milliner's and the tailor's establishments might be rendered available? Redcliffe was shrewd and intelligent; his experience of the world was too large not to enable him to draw rapid inferences from certain circumstances, and the question which he had just asked himself in respect to the lovers' assignation became a conviction in his mind. He descended from the terrace, and passed slowly along the arcade lined with those shops where the choicest fruits of English gardens and hothouses, as well as of tropical produce, are so profusely displayed. In a few minutes the lady whom he had seen in the conservatory passed him by. He at once recognized her by her dress; he glanced at her countenance, and saw that though calm to the superficial observer, yet that it was an assumed and unnatural serenity which to the experienced eye veiled not the agitation that lay beneath. A tall footman in a superb livery, and carrying a gold-headed cane, was lounging in the arcade, but the instant he beheld the beautiful lady approaching, he accosted her with a respectful salutation.

"Has the fruit been sent to the carriage?" she inquired, and Redcliffe, who heard what passed, perceived that there was a clouded tremulousness in her low, soft, musical voice.

"Yes, my lady," was the response given by the lackey. "Are there any flowers which your ladyship has ordered?"

"None to-day," was her rejoinder. "I saw not any that pleased my fancy."

No wonder that this titled lady should have forgotten, or else have neglected, her originally proposed purchase of nature's floral beauties, for a sweeter and more delicious flower — love, which is the rose of the soul — had absorbed all her thoughts and engrossed all her time upon the terrace above.

She continued her way through the market, the footman following at a short distance, and when near the end of the arcade, she was suddenly joined by an individual whose almost revolting ugliness formed a perfectly hideous contrast with her own bright and fascinating beauty. He was a man of at least sixty, with large, prominent features, — a disagreeable and repulsive look, and so totally different from the fair creature who had become the object of Redcliffe's interest that it was impossible even to believe that he was her father, though more than old enough to claim that title, and very nigh sufficiently so to be her grandfather. His figure was ungainly, and had scarcely the advantages of dress to improve it, for though his raiment was all of the best materials, it nevertheless fitted as if thrown on with a pitchfork. His coat was large and loose, his pantaloons narrow, short, and scanty, and he wore gaiters, which were put on in a slovenly manner. But on the other hand, it was evident that he was very particular and nice with his lavish display of snowy shirt-frill. Such was the individual who joined the lady near that extremity of the arcade which fronts St. Paul's Church.

"I hope I have not kept you waiting," she said, as she took his proffered arm.

"No, certainly not, my angel," he answered, endeavouring to torture his looks and his voice into the tenderest expression of which they were susceptible, — those looks which were so repulsive, and that voice which was so harsh and discordant. "I have been turning over all the books in Willis's shop for the last half-hour, without finding what I wanted. Indeed, I was fearful, my sweetest Emily, that I should keep you waiting. And now, are all your purchases sent to the carriage?"

"All," was the response given by the lady, and Redcliffe, who had followed the group, saw the footman hurry on in advance to give a brother lackey notice of the approach of their master and mistress, so that the door of the magnificent equipage was ready opened by the time they reached it.

The uxorious old husband — for in this light did he evidently stand toward that young and beautiful lady — handed her in, and when the door closed upon them, he gave the word, " Home." The two footmen touched their hats, and sprang up behind, each with his gold-headed cane; the stout coachman — who seemed as if having once got on the box, he had grown to it and could never hope to get down again — just suffered the lash of his whip to touch the backs of the two splendid bay horses which were already pawing the ground, impatient of the delay, and off dashed the superb equipage, Redcliffe perceiving that an earl's armorial bearings were blazoned on the panels.

He continued his way in deep thought, and returned to that fashionable street in which the neighbouring establishments of Madame Angelique and M. Bertin were situated. By the time he reached that street, the dusk was closing in, — for the reader will recollect that it is the month of January of which we are writing, — and both shops were now a blaze of gaslight. It seemed as if Redcliffe's mind were already made up as to the course which he should pursue, for without the slightest hesitation, he at once turned into the tailor's establishment. M. Bertin was behind the counter, and he received Mr. Redcliffe's orders, which were for some new clothes.

" Have the goodness, sir," said the obsequious Bertin, with his politest bowings and scrapings, " to walk this way," and he conducted his new customer into a well-furnished back parlour, where he was wont to measure his distinguished patrons.

Redcliffe was exceedingly profuse in the orders which he gave to M. Bertin, and as a matter of course, he said not a syllable on the subject of price. His object was to make as favourable an impression as possible upon the tailor.

" What name and address, sir, shall I have the honour of entering in my book? " asked M. Bertin, when he had finished the measurement of his new customer, and he was all smiles and bows, for the liberality of Redcliffe's order had won the admiration of the mercenary, money-loving Frenchman.

Redcliffe gave the necessary particulars, and then added, " Perhaps, as I am a total stranger to you, you will allow me to leave a cheque upon my banker for whatsoever amount you choose to name? "

"Oh, it is by no means necessary, I can assure you, sir," responded M. Bertin, with continued smilings and bowings. "I feel highly honoured, sir, in having your name upon my books, and hope long to see it there. Money in advance? Oh, no, sir, not for the world! Bills sent in every Christmas, sir; those are my terms."

"You will pardon me for having offered you other terms," said Mr. Redcliffe, "but I am comparatively a stranger in England. I have been many, many years abroad — in India," he added, as if quite in a careless manner, although he both foresaw and intended what the effect should be.

"Oh, indeed! in India, sir!" said M. Bertin, at once catching at the idea that his new customer must be a wealthy nabob. "Ah, sir, fortunes are rapidly made in India."

"Sometimes," observed Redcliffe, still with an air of assumed carelessness, but yet with a sufficient degree of significance to imply that it was so in his own case.

"Not been long in London, therefore, I presume, sir?" said M. Bertin.

"No, only a few months," was the response.

"Beg pardon, sir, but married, I suppose?" continued the tailor, who under a show of garrulity was always thus wont to fathom the affairs and circumstances of new customers so far as they themselves would allow him. "All rich gentlemen returning from India bring beautiful English wives with them, or else they find them at once on setting foot in their native land."

"Neither happens to be my case, M. Bertin," rejoined Redcliffe. "Indeed, I am completely a stranger — "

"Ah, sir, what a pity," cried the tailor. "Plenty of money, and don't know how to spend it? Beg your pardon, sir — it may seem a very great liberty — but I mean no offence," and then as Redcliffe forced his countenance to assume an air of interest in what Bertin was saying to him, the bustling Frenchman closed the parlour door.

"Pray speak candidly," observed Redcliffe, "you need not be afraid of giving me offence. I know that you fashionable tailors at the West End do not always confine your avocations to the mere cutting and fitting of garments, but that you sometimes considerately and kindly help the inexperienced to initiate themselves into the mysteries of London life. Are my ideas correct?"

"Nothing could possibly be more accurate, sir," responded Bertin. "Your name is now upon my books where I have the honour of chronicling some of the first names of the British aristocracy. Of course, sir, noblemen and gentlemen will be gay now and then, but they have a thousand and one reasons for concealing their gaieties as much as possible."

"I understand you, M. Bertin," answered Redcliffe, "and to tell you the truth, I am rejoiced that accident should have led me to enter your establishment. It was the handsome exterior which drew my attention. Ah, by the way, there is an equally handsome establishment next door. I happened casually to notice it — "

"Madame Angelique's, sir. An excellent neighbour of mine," and M. Bertin bent a significant look upon Redcliffe.

"Madame Angelique?" said the latter, repeating the name with the air of one who thought he had heard it before. "Surely that name is not altogether unfamiliar to me? Ah, I recollect! At a hotel where I was dining, I overheard two young gentlemen at a neighbouring table mention that name in a subdued tone. It did not particularly strike me at the time — "

"Very indiscreet of those two young gentlemen, whoever they were, — very indiscreet indeed," said M. Bertin, with a look of annoyance, but instantaneously brightening up again, he added, "Fortunately, however, their imprudent mention of that name was overheard by a gentleman of honour, a man of the world, too, such as I perceive that you are, sir — "

"Oh, I should not think of telling tales out of school, whatever they may be," exclaimed Redcliffe. "But frankly speaking, M. Bertin, I begin to be terribly wearied of the monotony of the existence I am leading, and if, as I think I understand, you have the power of giving me a few suggestions in respect to the means of pleasure pursuit, I shall not merely be grateful, but shall know how to reward you."

The tailor gazed fixedly upon Redcliffe's countenance for a few moments, and, satisfied with the survey, he said, "At any time, sir, that you wish to be introduced into the most charming and agreeable female society, pray favour me with a call. You know what I mean, — female society of a certain class, but where intellect and elegance of manners, as well as all drawing-room accomplishments, are blended with the most ravishing personal beauty."

"Not for a moment, M. Bertin, will I affect to misunderstand you," answered Redcliffe. "On the contrary, I do understand your meaning, and I shall avail myself of your offer. How will you be engaged this evening?"

"I shall be entirely at your orders, sir," responded the tailor, inwardly chuckling at the idea of having got hold of a wealthy nabob, who beneath a severe exterior concealed the passions and inclinations of a licentious libertine.

"At nine o'clock I will return to pay you a visit," said Mr. Redcliffe.

"You will find me here, sir," responded Bertin, "and then perhaps," he added, with a significant smile, "you shall know something more of Madame Angelique, or at least of the paradise of houris which is as mysteriously concealed within her establishment, as the happy valley of Rasselas was hidden in the midst of mountains."

Redcliffe smiled, nodded in a friendly way to the tailor, and took his departure.

CHAPTER XXIX

EVELEEN

Precisely at nine o'clock Mr. Redcliffe returned to the tailor's establishment, and found M. Bertin expecting him. The little Frenchman bowed and scraped in his very best style, when Redcliffe thrust a well-filled purse in his hand, and the recipient thought within himself that he was destined to turn a pretty penny by the wealthy Indian nabob.

" I will not insult you, sir," he said, as he conducted Redcliffe into his parlour, " by observing that the strictest honour and secrecy are required in respect to those mysteries into which you are about to be initiated. I flatter myself that I am rather skilful in forming opinions of persons at a first glance — "

" You need not be afraid, M. Bertin," interrupted Redcliffe, " that I shall go elsewhere to babble of whatsoever I may see at Madame Angelique's."

" To be sure not, sir! You and I know what the world is," rejoined the tailor, with a significant look, " and a gentleman of your travel and experience is well aware that such establishments as these are of the greatest convenience."

" The greatest convenience, indeed, I have not the slightest doubt," exclaimed Redcliffe, somewhat drily.

" Have the goodness, sir, to follow me," said M. Bertin, and he forthwith conducted his new patron up the well-carpeted staircase, to that room on the second story where Annette was always in attendance at certain hours for the reception of visitors.

This woman opened the mysterious mirror-contrived door, and tapped at the one inside, which was speedily unfolded, and Clement Redcliffe passed on into the luxuriously furnished saloon to which the reader has already been introduced. The four young ladies were not, however, there at the moment; it was Madame Angelique who gave him admittance, and an introduction was effected by the obsequious tailor, who immediately afterward withdrew. But while passing by the milliner, he hurriedly whispered, "A purse with a hundred guineas as my fee. Make much of him."

Madame Angelique closed the mysterious door, having thus received an intimation of Redcliffe's liberality toward her accomplice the tailor, as well as a hint to the effect that she might, by playing her own cards well, feather her nest to her heart's content.

"Have the kindness to follow me, sir," she said, with her most amiable and winning smile, as she opened the door of the apartment.

Redcliffe, purposely assuming as much blandness of manner as he could possibly call to his aid, accompanied Madame Angelique to her own boudoir, to which she led him. She begged him to be seated, and taking a chair near, she began expressing her sense of the honour which she experienced in receiving a patron of whom her friend M. Bertin had spoken so highly. She went on to intimate that as gold was evidently no object to Mr. Redcliffe, she could introduce him to some of the most beautiful creatures in the metropolis, — not merely those who were dwelling beneath her own roof, but others with whom she was acquainted and to whom she had access.

"My friend M. Bertin hinted to me this evening previous to your arrival, sir," she continued, "that you have been a long time in India. I know not exactly how your taste may be, but I think that I might possibly introduce you to certain paragons of beauty from that same Oriental clime —"

"Indeed," observed Redcliffe, who was determined to glean as much as he possibly could from Madame Angelique. "I should be delighted, and you have been rightly informed that money is no object to me. But who are these paragons of beauty of whom you speak?"

"Oh, it will be no easy matter to accomplish that business," responded the milliner. "As yet scarcely any steps have been taken, but if I make up my mind to a particular enterprise, I seldom fail in accomplishing it. You must know, sir," continued the infamous woman, "that my noble and generous patrons make it worth my while to furnish all possible rareties and varieties of female charms, and amongst these patrons I hope to include Mr. Redcliffe."

"Most assuredly," was this gentleman's response. "Now I see, my dear madam, that between you and me there need not exist any disguise. I am wealthy, and I am addicted to pleasure. I care not how large a price I pay for it. You understand me."

"I do, Mr. Redcliffe," replied Madame Angelique, "and I thank you for speaking so frankly. It is always better."

"And those Oriental beauties?"

"As yet I know nothing more of them than that they are beauties," continued the milliner. "One is comparatively fair, of ravishing loveliness; the other is of dusky complexion, and as handsome in countenance and as finely modelled in form as poet ever imagined."

"Indeed," said Redcliffe. "And where do they live, these Oriental houris of yours?"

"Ah, my dear sir," exclaimed Madame Angelique, tapping Redcliffe familiarly on the arm, "I cannot exactly tell you all my little secrets. But you who have been in India will doubtless appreciate these rareties, and you will not mind a liberal outlay if I introduce you first to one, and afterward to the other — Of course I mean beneath this roof. Doubtless the task will be a difficult one; there will be stratagem, machination, inveigling, and so forth, but once here — you understand me — for their own credit's sake they will not afterward speak of what has occurred."

"Am I to understand that they live together?" inquired Redcliffe, "because if so, the task will perhaps —"

"Be all the more difficult," Madame Angelique hastened to exclaim, purposing to exact a price commensurate with the amount of obstacle, real or imaginary, which she might eventually be enabled to boast of having overcome.

"Yes, they live together; the fairer of the two is the mistress, the darker one is the attendant, and it is in a suburb of London that they reside. But more than this you must really not expect to know for the present," added Madame Angelique, with a smile.

"Oh, I will not attempt to penetrate into your secrets, my dear madam," exclaimed Redcliffe. "By all means let me be considered as the one who is to be fortunate enough — "

" It is a bargain, sir," interrupted the milliner, " and shall be fulfilled."

" But," continued Redcliffe, " in whatever steps you may take with regard to these Oriental paragons, remember that my name — "

" Good heavens, my dear sir, not for the world! " cried Madame Angelique. " I am discretion personified. Your name shall not be mentioned. I cannot promise that success will be speedily accomplished. As yet I have learned but little more than the fact of these charming creatures' existence in London. Yes, I have satisfied myself that they are the beauties they have been represented — "

" But you have not as yet spoken to them? " interjected Redcliffe, as if with a careless manner.

" Oh, no! they are all but inaccessible, and this constitutes the first difficulty that has to be encountered. Nevertheless, I am not to be frightened by such obstacles. And now, as we are speaking with frankness, Mr. Redcliffe, I must tell you something."

" To be sure — in all frankness," was this gentleman's response.

" You already know," continued Madame Angelique, drawing her chair a little closer toward Redcliffe, and assuming an air of mysterious confidence, " that I enjoy the patronage of some of the highest and wealthiest personages in the realm. By the bye, do you happen to be acquainted — but no! If I recollect aright, M. Bertin assured me that you are a perfect stranger in London."

" A perfect stranger," replied Redcliffe.

" I was about to observe," continued Madame Angelique, " that to one only of my patrons have I previously mentioned anything concerning these Oriental women, and he has charged me to keep them for him. In a word, sir, his Grace — I mean the personage of whom I speak, has promised me no less a sum than a thousand guineas."

" And I, Madame Angelique," exclaimed Redcliffe, " unhesitatingly promise you double the amount, on the mere faith of your representations in respect to the extraordinary beauty of these women. Would you have an earnest of my liberality? It is here," and he flung a bank-note upon the table.

Madame Angelique gracefully inclined her head in acknowledgment of the retaining fee, and glancing rapidly at the note could scarcely repress a start of surprise and exultation when she saw that it was for five hundred pounds. But instantaneously recovering her self-possession, — as she did not choose to suffer her new patron to perceive that, well though she was paid by others, she was nevertheless but little accustomed to a display of such munificence as this, — she observed, "It is a compact, Mr. Redcliffe, and not to another soul will I speak of that Indian lady and her dark-eyed ayah."

"No, there must be the strictest honour in our dealings, Madame Angelique," responded Redcliffe, "and if you play me false, I shall never more set foot in your establishment. But what guarantee have I that you will not suffer me to be forestalled by him to whom you have previously spoken? You ere now let a word drop showing me that he is a duke, and how can I possibly hope to compete with a personage of such high rank, and no doubt of such wealth, as his Grace to whom you have alluded?"

"It is all a matter of honour, Mr. Redcliffe," answered Madame Angelique; "no, not of honour — of self-interest. There! I put it in that light. You will pay me double what the duke has offered, and the bargain is yours, not his. Besides, the duke has gone to his country-seat in Hampshire, and will not return till the middle of February. In the meantime we may perhaps bring matters to an issue."

From this discourse Clement Redcliffe had no difficulty in comprehending that the duke to whom the infamous woman alluded was his Grace of Marchmont.

"Well, Madame Angelique," he said, "I put faith in your words. And now, with your permission — "

"I understand you, sir," she interrupted him, with a meaning smile. "There are at this moment four beautiful young ladies in my house, and by the bye, one of them, a splendid creature, is going down into the neighbourhood of that very duke's country-seat in the course of a few days. This is between you and me. You will see her presently. Her name is Lettice Rodney."

"By all means, introduce me to your four beauties," observed Redcliffe.

"Have the kindness to follow me, sir. They will doubtless be in the saloon by this time; they were performing their toilet when you arrived."

Thus speaking, Madame Angelique rose from her seat, and led the way out of the boudoir. She conducted Redcliffe to the saloon, and having introduced him to Lettice, Armantine, Linda, and Eveleen, with many smiles and simperings, she retired, closing the door after her. The four girls were as elegantly dressed as when we first presented them to the reader; the table was covered with wines and refreshments, the atmosphere was warm and perfumed, every feature of the scene was but too well calculated to infuse heat into the blood of the coldest anchorite.

But Redcliffe experienced no such fervour. There was a deep sense of disgust in his mind, — a disgust at the gilded iniquities into which he was being initiated, — a disgust too at the part which circumstances had led him to perform. He nevertheless assumed the most cheerful air that he could possibly put on. He sat down in the midst of the meretricious group, and at once glided into conversation with them. He soon discovered that they were well-bred, intelligent, and accomplished, and that they were as fully able to converse on intellectual matters as to fritter away the time in vain, shallow frivolities. He spoke of his travels in far-off lands, he told them amusing anecdotes, he exerted all his powers to interest them. At first they liked not his aspect; they thought that he was haughty, stern, and severe, but they soon began to exchange rapid and significant glances amongst themselves, to the effect that they were agreeably disappointed, and that he was a most delightful and entertaining personage. They had already received a hint as to his liberality, and they therefore did their best to appear amiable on their own side.

But all the while Redcliffe was thus conversing with them, he was in reality studying their individual dispositions and characters so far as it was possible for him to do so under circumstances which threw an artificial gloss to a certain extent over them. He had a purpose to carry out, and he required one of these females as an agent. Fain would he have decided upon addressing himself to Lettice, inasmuch as he had learned that she was shortly to repair into the neighbourhood of the Duke of Marchmont's country-seat, but he saw something in her which forbade the idea of his making this young woman his confidante. He felt assured that she was not to be trusted. Next he studied the German girl, Linda, but he saw that she was of a sensuous and luxurious temperament, and that she was therefore unfitted for the influences which he purposed to bring to bear upon the one who should be the object of his choice. He directed his attention to the French girl, Armantine, but exquisitely beautiful though she were, and delicately classical as were her features, there was nevertheless a certain flashing of the eyes which denoted insincerity, and his thoughts settled not upon her. There was but one left, and this was Eveleen the Irish girl. There was something ingenuous in her looks, — something frank and honest in the expression of her eyes; and then, too, he ever and anon observed a cloud gathering over her features at certain anecdotes which he purposely related, and which had the effect of bringing back visions of home to the memories of these lost ones. Eveleen therefore became the object of his choice.

They all sat down at the table, and Mr. Redcliffe in the course of an hour drank more wine than he had altogether done for years past. But this he was compelled to do, lest any suspicion of an ulterior intent should arise in the minds of the three who were to be excluded from his confidence. Nevertheless the libations of champagne clouded not his intellect, much less overpowered it; his own strong will was more powerful than the influence of wine. He made Eveleen sit next to him, and though courteous enough to all four, his principal attentions were devoted to her. This seemed significant, and after awhile, Lettice, Linda, and Armantine withdrew from the saloon.

Redcliffe was now alone with Eveleen. She rose and made a movement toward a door at the farther extremity, and which communicated with a voluptuously furnished chamber.

" Resume your seat," said Mr. Redcliffe, " I wish to speak to you."

The girl, who was for a moment astonished that he did not at once rise and follow her, naturally fancied that he wished to prolong the pleasures of the table, and returning to her chair, she was about to refill his glass.

" No, we have had enough wine," said Redcliffe, in a kind though firm and decisive tone.

Eveleen gazed upon him with renewed astonishment, and for a few moments he remained absorbed in thought.

"Tell me," he presently said, "how long have you been here?"

"About three years, sir," she answered, and again the cloud lowered for a moment over her features, which were naturally of so sprightly and piquant an expression.

"Three years," continued Redcliffe mournfully, — "three years of sin for one who by her beauty and her intelligence, her manners and her accomplishments, might have adorned the highest sphere of society, had she remained virtuous."

"Oh, do not speak to me in this way," cried Eveleen almost petulantly, for Redcliffe's words, as well as the tone in which they were uttered, had sunk deep down into her very soul.

"It is not a reproach, much less an insult that I am addressing you," he said, in a still kinder voice. "You will perhaps live to bless the day when you thus encountered me, or I have very erroneously read your character and disposition. Tell me — and speak candidly — are there not times when your memory is carried back to a bright and happy home?"

"Good heavens, sir, why do you talk thus?" exclaimed Eveleen. "Who are you? Wherefore came you hither? Is it possible —"

"It is possible, my poor girl," responded Redcliffe, "that I may have come hither with some object very different from that which was supposed, — very different indeed from the objects which men have in penetrating into such a place as this. But before I explain myself, tell me, Eveleen, have you parents?"

The Irish girl burst into tears; she endeavoured to check them, but vainly; she could not. The more she strove, the less was her power to command her feelings; they convulsed her.

"Yes," resumed Redcliffe, "I see that you have parents, who are doubtless deploring the disappearance of a beloved daughter. Would you not like to be restored to them?"

"Oh, I would give up twenty years of my life to pass but a few in that once happy home," and the unfortunate girl sobbed bitterly.

"In me, Eveleen," said Redcliffe, "you shall find a friend, a real friend, — a friend who will lift you up from degradation, instead of helping to plunge you farther down, a friend who will do all he can for you, if you yourself be accessible to the influences of such pure and well-meant friendship."

By a strange but very natural revulsion of feeling, Eveleen grew calm. She wiped the tears from her eyes, and gazed upon Mr. Redcliffe with mingled amazement, gratitude, and admiration. Long was it since her ears had drunk in such language as this; long was it since such balm had been poured down into her heart.

"Do not think," he continued, "that you are so far lost it is not worth while to return into a virtuous course. I am well aware that such is too often the fatal error to which fallen woman clings. She thinks that by the very fact of her fall, insurmountable barriers have suddenly sprung up between herself and the pathway from which she has diverged, — barriers which she may vainly attempt to climb in order to reënter it. But it is not so. True, when a coronal of purity has fallen from the brow, it can never be replaced; true, that chastity once lost cannot be regained. But this is no reason for a perseverance in sin, and so great is the merit of abandoning the path of error that it goes far toward a complete atonement for the past. The arms of parents may be opened to welcome back again a lost daughter, if she return to them in penitence and in sorrow for her misdeeds. Eveleen, you are not deficient in intelligence; am I not speaking truly?"

The poor Irish girl gave no verbal answer, but she fell upon her knees at Redcliffe's feet, and taking his hand, gazed up at him in a manner which was expressive of a fervid gratitude for the promise he seemed to hold out, of entreaty that he would perform it, but of suspense lest it were a happiness too great for her to know. All the contrition of a Magdalen was in that look. The waters of life had not been dried up in that girl's heart; their issue had been merely closed by the circumstances of her position, but now the rock was smitten with the magic rod which kind words can ever wield, and she felt as for three long years past she had not felt before. There was a world of sentiment in that look with which she gazed up into Redcliffe's countenance, — a look which once beheld, never could be forgotten.

"Rise, my poor girl," he said, profoundly affected. "I see that I have not been deceived in you, and I will be your friend."

"But my parents, sir, — oh, my parents," exclaimed Eveleen, with an almost suffocating outburst of emotions, "how will they be brought to receive their dishonoured daughter?"

"If they possess the hearts and the feelings of parents," responded Mr. Redcliffe, "rest assured that you have nothing to fear. I will cheerfully undertake the task of seeing them; I will go to them, I will reason with them, I will entreat them, — in a word, if they be not something less or something more than human, I will procure their forgiveness for their daughter, should she be really penitent."

"My saviour! my deliverer!" cried Eveleen, with another outburst of impassioned feeling, "how can I ever sufficiently thank you? Oh, that I could do anything to testify my gratitude!"

"You can," rejoined Redcliffe.

"I can?" cried the girl, joy animating her countenance. "Oh, tell me but how, sir, and the cheerfulness with which I will obey your commands, the zeal and the fidelity with which I will execute your orders, the unasking devotion and even the very blindness with which I will be guided by your will, shall serve as the first proofs of that contrition whereof I have assured you."

"Listen, then," said Mr. Redcliffe; "listen with a calm attention. You know the Duke of Marchmont?"

"I do, sir," responded Eveleen, a blush mantling upon her cheeks; then in a hesitating voice, she added, "When I was beguiled from my home in Ireland, and brought to this house, it was he to whom I first became a victim."

"The Duke of Marchmont," continued Redcliffe, "is engaged in certain treacherous pursuits into which it deeply concerns me to obtain an insight. That infamous woman Madame Angelique is his accomplice, or at least his agent. Something is going on wherein she is mixed up. Next Tuesday evening a box is to be fetched away, under circumstances of mystery and precaution, by a young man in the Duke of Marchmont's employment. Have you an opportunity of watching the affairs which progress in this establishment? Do you consider it possible to obtain any intelligence, no matter how slight it may be, as to the mystery connected with that box?"

"I will endeavour, sir," responded Eveleen; "rest assured that I will endeavour. Yes," she continued thoughtfully, "I have no doubt I can obtain some insight into what is going on. At all events, be assured, sir, that I will do my best. Oh, I should be so rejoiced to give you a proof of my gratitude — of my penitence."

"You must remain here for a few days longer," observed Redcliffe. "This is my address," and as he thus spoke he gave Eveleen his card. "Come to me on Wednesday morning next, under any circumstances. If in the meantime you should have discovered aught relative to the box, so much the better; but if not, you will come all the same, —you shall continue no longer within these walls. Can you leave when you choose? And will you accomplish all that I have suggested?"

"On Wednesday, sir," rejoined Eveleen, "I will be with you," and her countenance expressed all the genuine joy which she felt at the prospect of emancipation from a mode of existence which was abhorrent to her.

"Be it so," said Redcliffe. "And now, to keep up appearances, I shall leave money upon this table. Remember, I am putting faith in you. I will prove your friend, if you show yourself worthy of my confidence."

"No power on earth, sir, could induce me to deceive you," responded Eveleen, with fervour.

Mr. Redcliffe threw a number of bank-notes upon the table, and shaking Eveleen by the hand, he took his departure, — the girl affording him egress by means of the mirror-contrived door. The tailor's female adjutant Annette was waiting in the room of the adjoining house wherewith that door communicated; Redcliffe slipped a piece of gold into her hand, and in a few minutes he was retracing his way along the street toward his lodgings at Mrs. Macaulay's.

CHAPTER XXX

THE EARL OF LASCELLES

We are about to direct the reader's attention to a sumptuously furnished mansion in the neighbourhood of Kensington. It stood in the midst of its own grounds, which were spacious and enclosed with walls. Within that enclosure there were beautiful gardens, which even in this wintry season of which we are writing presented an aspect of verdure to the eye, on account of the numerous evergreens which were either interspersed about, or which bordered the avenues. Conservatories and hothouses, containing fruits and plants, also met the view. There were grass-plats, too, and pieces of ornamental water; and the entire aspect of the scene — buildings and grounds — indicated the wealth of the possessor.

This mansion belonged to the Earl of Lascelles, and we may at once inform our reader that he was the nobleman whom Redcliffe had seen join his beautiful wife in the arcade at Covent Garden. The earl had been married twice. By his first wife he had a son, who was now grown up to man's estate, and who bore the denomination of Lord Osmond. His mother had died some few years previously to the period of which we are writing, and it was only within the last eighteen months that the earl had espoused his second wife, the beautiful Ethel. This lady, belonging to a good family, had been left an orphan at an early age, and was brought up by an uncle and aunt, who had a large family of their own. Though tolerably well off, they found quite enough to do with their resources, and as Ethel was portionless, she had been constrained by the circumstances of her position, as well as by the earnest persuasion of her relatives, to accept the suit of the Earl of Lascelles, who offered her a title and to make her the sharer of his fortune of sixty thousand a year. It must be added that this sacrifice of a young and lovely creature to an old and repulsive-looking man was not aggravated in its severity by any preëngagement of Ethel's affections, and it was therefore fortunate for her that in bestowing her hand where it was impossible she could love, she had not to deplore ruined hopes and a withered attachment in any other quarter. She accepted her destiny with as much resignation as possible, and perhaps with more so than if she had been born in a humbler sphere, for in that fashionable world wherein she moved, she had been by no means unaccustomed to contemplate the spectacle of young and beautiful creatures like herself sacrificed to the selfish and interested views of parents. She did not therefore stand alone in this martyrdom of marriage to which she was made a victim, and there is always a sort of solace in the reflection that one's own lot, however disagreeable, forms not a complete exception to the general rule.

The Earl of Lascelles was, however, by no means a man, either in person or in disposition, to win the love or esteem of a beautiful and intelligent young lady of Ethel's age. He was attached to her as old men usually are to wives juvenile enough to be their daughters, or indeed their granddaughters; that is to say, he doted upon her with an uxoriousness that displayed itself in a ridiculous manner, even in public, and his assiduities to please her were wearisome and obtrusive. She really had no whims or caprices, but he treated her as if she had a thousand, constantly heaping gifts upon her which she did not want or could not use. He would buy her shawls of the costliest price and of the gayest colours, jewelry which was totally incompatible with existing fashions and with the peculiar elegance of her own toilet, and then he would be annoyed because she did not wear those things. But if these were his only failings, she needed not much to repine; it was his character generally which was enough to wear out her patience and frequently inspire her with disgust. For the earl was one of the most consummate boasters and braggarts in all England, and withal too the greatest romancist. We do not mean the reader to infer that he wrote books; nothing of the sort. His ignorance on all literary matters was deplorable. But we use the term "romancist" as a more courteous expression than that of "liar," which might, however, be very well and properly applied, inasmuch as his lordship shot with a bow longer than even the greatest of travellers, who are accustomed to tell strange tales, are privileged to use. When quite a young man, he had served in the army, and reached the rank of captain, but the death of his father, by raising him to the earldom, led him to abandon the profession. Nothing he loved so much as to sit for hours in Ethel's society and endeavour to amuse her with his exploits when he was a military man, with the wonders he beheld when he travelled abroad, or even with the deeds of his most youthful days, and as she perfectly well understood that he was indulging in a tissue of the most egregious falsehoods, she at times experienced much trouble in concealing her disgust. It was just the same when they had company, or when they visited their friends and acquaintances; he would go on giving utterance to boast after boast, lie after lie, totally inobservant of the smiles of either contemptuous pity or downright scorn which he conjured up to the lips of his listeners. Thus Ethel frequently found herself in a most painful position, for it was bad enough to have a husband so old and so ugly, without the additional annoyance of seeing him rendering himself so supremely ridiculous. When they were alone together, he was continuously lavishing upon her his nauseating caresses, and he would often affect a childish sportiveness, talking nonsense, playing tricks, performing antics, and gambolling as if he were a little fellow of a dozen years old. The earl's was not therefore a character or a disposition to promote Ethel's happiness, to win her esteem or her love, or to compensate for his own age and his ugliness.

It was about nine o'clock in the morning of the day after Redcliffe's adventures at Madame Angelique's house that we shall find the Earl of Lascelles seated in his dressing-room, undergoing the process of shaving, which was being performed upon him by his confidential valet. This man was about forty years of age, endowed with a consummate hypocrisy, and who had obtained a complete ascendency over his master by pandering to his vanity, listening patiently to his stories, and appearing to put the utmost faith in them. His manners were fawning, cringing, and servile; he never contradicted the earl, but invariably echoed whatsoever his lordship said, and studied to give precisely such an answer as any question that was put might seem framed to elicit. He was bustling, active, and perfectly conversant in all the duties he had to perform. These were multifarious enough, inasmuch as they comprised all the mysteries of his noble master's toilet.

Makepeace — for this was the valet's name (and it was believed to be a feigned one, the particular nomenclature being chosen to give an additionally harmonious gloss to all his assumed attributes), — Makepeace, we say, was at once his lordship's perruquier, his barber, his doctor, and in some sense his tailor. It was Makepeace who dressed his lordship's wig in such a style that his lordship firmly believed the assurance that it looked, if anything, even more natural than his own hair would have done if he had not the misfortune to be bald. It was Makepeace who shaved his lordship so clean that his lordship's finger might pass over his chin without encountering the stubble of a single hair. It was Makepeace who caused to be made up at the chemist's, according to receipts of his own, the medicines which his lordship took to keep him in health and to sustain a juvenescent appearance. It was Makepeace who compounded washes and cosmetics to improve his lordship's complexion, and to keep away pimples. It was Makepeace, likewise, who from time to time was closeted in solemn conference with his lordship's tailor, showing where such and such padding ought to be placed, and yet throughout the three kingdoms of England, Scotland, and Ireland, as well as in the principality of Wales, or indeed any other part of the queen's dominions, it would be impossible to discover a worse-dressed man than the Earl of Lascelles. His lordship, however, thought otherwise; Makepeace persuaded him that it was as he thus thought, and therefore if his lordship were satisfied, nobody else had a right to find fault. As for the personal appearance of this said Makepeace, we may add that he had naturally a sharp, cunning, hypocritical look, of which he was perfectly conscious, and which he therefore endeavoured to conceal as much as poosible beneath such artificial gloss as the blandest smiles, the most honied speech, and the most obsequious manners could possibly constitute.

It was, then, as we have said, at nine o'clock in the morning that the Earl of Lascelles, having emerged from the bedchamber in his dressing-gown and slippers, and with his white cotton nightcap on his head, sat down in his elegantly furnished dressing-room to commence the process of the toilet. We should observe that the white cotton nightcap was fringed all around with hair, of precisely the same sort and description as that of which his lordship's wigs were composed, and he actually flattered himself that his beautiful countess firmly believed he had a fine natural crop of his own hair upon his head. Indeed, Makepeace had assured him that the fringe around the nightcap was a masterpiece of art, and it was quite consistent that Makepeace should say so, inasmuch as the device was of his own invention, and it was a part of his duty to stitch the fringes inside the nightcaps when they were delivered to him by the laundry woman. The dressing-room contained numerous cupboards and chests of drawers, which were always kept carefully locked, — Makepeace retaining the keys, so that none of the other servants should penetrate into the mysteries of those receptacles. Wigs and cosmetics, nightcap fringes and medicines, anti-pimple washes and padded garments, false teeth and whisker dyes, books for the preservation of health and guides to the toilet, formed the miscellaneous contents of those drawers and cupboards, and Mr. Makepeace turned, in addition to his handsome salary, a very pretty penny indeed in his capacity of paymaster for all those things on the earl's behalf.

"How do I look this morning, Makepeace?" inquired the nobleman, as he sat opposite a full-length mirror, with his hair-fringed nightcap on his head, his short shrivelled frame enveloped in a gorgeous French silk dressing-gown, and his feet thrust into red morocco slippers.

"How strange, my lord," exclaimed the valet, but only in a subdued voice, and in accents most harmoniously bland, "that I should have been just at the very moment thinking I had never seen your lordship look better for the last ten years."

"Is it ten years that you have been with me, Makepeace?" inquired the nobleman, grinning like an antiquated goat at the compliment which his valet paid him.

"Yes, my lord; it is ten years," answered Makepeace, with a profound sigh, which he purposely rendered as audible as possible.

"What makes you sigh?" asked the earl.

"It is enough to make me sigh, my lord," rejoined the valet, "when I look at myself in the glass, and then look at your lordship. Ten years have made a wonderful alteration in me, but they really seem as if they had passed over your lordship without leaving the slightest influence behind them."

"Hem! I think I wear well," said the nobleman. "Time, you see, is very good to me; he forgets me."

"Considering your lordship is close upon your forty-fifth year," said Makepeace, who knew perfectly well that the earl would never see sixty again, "I think your lordship has some little reason to be grateful to Time."

"Well, I think so too. But frankly speaking, Makepeace, — and I know that you will answer me with your accustomed candour, — do I look more than forty-five? Could a close observer have any reason to suspect that I am a day older? Not that I am, you know, but there are men who at my age look as if they were — what shall I say? — sixty. And then too, that *Peerage* tells such horrid lies. I shall have the author of it brought to the bar of the House of Lords for breach of privilege."

"Let me beseech your lorship to treat the unfortunate man with the contempt he deserves," said Makepeace, assuming an air of humane and philanthropic entreaty. "I dare say he has only put down your lordship so much older than your lordship can possibly be, because your lordship did not send him a cheque for a hundred guineas or so."

"That's the truth of it," cried the earl; "so I shall let the rascal alone. Besides, a young man like me — looking even younger, too, on account of the possession of such a youthful and beautiful wife — can afford to laugh at the wretched malignity of a fellow who sets me down at sixty. And I will explain to you how the mistake has arisen, — if indeed it be a mistake, and not sheer wickedness. Did I ever tell you at what age I was first married?"

"I think I have heard it said that your lordship was married at fifteen," answered Makepeace.

"Exactly so," exclaimed the earl, "and I was a father at sixteen. But then, you see, I was precocious for my age. Why, I was only sixteen, three months and a half, when I had that terrible encounter with the five highwaymen on Bagshot Heath."

"I have read the account of it, my lord, in an old newspaper," responded Makepeace. "I think, if I remember right, your lordship killed two of them, and led the other three, bound hand and foot, in triumph into Hounslow."

"Those were the very facts of the case," exclaimed the earl; "I see that you must have read them. I was only seventeen when I cut my way through the French regiment of cuirassiers, killed the trumpet major, who was seven feet high, took the colonel prisoner, and carried off the colours."

"That achievement, my lord, is duly recorded in history," answered Makepeace. "It was only the other day I was reading of it in a history of the late war. Your lordship must have been in a dreadful state of excitement after such an exploit?"

"Not a bit of it," cried the earl. "I was as cool as a cucumber, and when I got the cuirassier colonel to the camp, I challenged him —"

"To mortal combat, my lord?"

"No, to a drinking bout. I was terrible in those days for my achievements with the bottle. The colonel had the reputation of drinking more at a sitting than any other man in the French army, but I beat him. We sat down at table, piling the bottles around us as we emptied them, and we heaped them up so high in a circle roundabout us, that when the colonel dropped down dead drunk, I got up — as sober as I am now — and had literally to dash down a wall of bottles before I could get out of the place."

"Your lordship's head must have ached very much the next morning?" said Makepeace.

"Not a bit of it," ejaculated the earl. "I recollect I was up at five o'clock, and rode the celebrated steeplechase in which I beat the whole field, won the ten thousand guinea stakes, and killed that celebrated horse of mine that was sent me as a present by the pasha of Egypt for discovering the source of the Nile."

"Your lordship travelled early in life," said Makepeace, with the air of a man who was so deeply interested in his master's exploits that he anxiously sought for further information.

"Yes, I travelled early," said the earl, in a complacent and self-satisfied way. "I left college when I was thirteen, and set off on a walking tour through Africa and Asia. Of course I could not manage my tour on the Continent of Europe, because we were at war at the time."

"The deserts of Africa, my lord, must have been unpleasant?" remarked Makepeace, inquiringly.

"Yes, for your milk-and-water travellers, who cannot bear hardships," replied the earl, "but I cared nothing for them. I caught a wild elephant, tamed him, and rode on his back, so you see that it was not altogether a walking tour. I was somewhat troubled with lions and tigers, which swarm as thick as mosquitoes in that country, but I was always on the alert in the daytime, and at night, when I chose to travel, — which I chiefly did, on account of the coolness of the night air, — I contrived a portable fire, which the elephant carried with his trunk, and so it frightened off the wild beasts."

"Exceedingly strange, my lord!" exclaimed Makepeace, "but I was reading an account of this remarkable mode of travelling the other day, and as no name was mentioned, I was at a loss to conceive who the traveller could have been. I thank your lordship for the information; it has cleared up the mystery."

"So you see," continued the earl, "that when I was very young, I encountered a great number of strange adventures. Mine has been an extraordinary life, and for comparatively a young man, I can look back upon a great deal. Did you ever hear of my first speech in the House, when I succeeded to the title?"

"I think I have heard of the wonderful effect it produced, my lord," answered Makepeace.

"Effect, indeed," ejaculated the nobleman. "It was on a very important subject. Some noble lord — I forget who he was — brought forward a motion that the Lord Chancellor, who was afraid of an apoplectic fit, should be permitted to sit without his wig. There was a crowded House, and all the first talents displayed themselves on the occasion. It was just going to a division at eleven o'clock at night, when the 'Contents' would have carried it, but I, who very well knew that the whole mystery of the British Constitution and the safety of Church and State were involved in the question, rose to say a few words."

"But I dare say they were not a few words," interjected

Makepeace, with a smirking smile, " which your lordship had to utter on so vital an occasion."

" Well, to confess the truth," answered the earl, " I did only intend to say a few words. I did not know my own oratorical powers at that time; indeed I scarcely suspected them. But when I found myself on my legs, I was hurried away as if by a tornado. I can compare it to nothing but a perfect hurricane of language, bearing along with it myriads of brilliant stars of metaphor. The very wig of the chancellor himself — that wig which was the subject of the memorable debate — stood on end. The perspiration ran down my face, so that all my clothes were saturated as if I had plunged into a hot bath, and, by the bye, I found on weighing myself next morning, that I had lost seven pounds of flesh. It was terrific. I began at eleven o'clock, and it was half-past three in the morning when I sat down, — the longest debate and the longest speech on record."

" I need not ask whether your lordship carried the day," observed Makepeace, " for history records the result."

" To be sure. The whole House became ' Non-Content ' in a moment after I sat down, and the Lord Chancellor never forgave me. It was all through his vindictive machinations that the king did not send for me to be prime minister a few months afterward; but his Majesty wrote me the handsomest apology, explaining how he would rather have me at the head of his councils than any statesman in England, but that he did not dare offend the old chancellor. I have got the king's letter still; I will show it to you one of these days."

" Her ladyship ought to be very proud of such a husband," observed Makepeace.

" To be sure she ought, and I believe she is. What is your opinion? "

" It is a delicate subject, my lord," responded the valet, with a simulated hesitation, " but still I do happen to know that her ladyship is proud of the alliance which she has so happily and, I may add, so gloriously formed."

" Come, tell me, my good fellow, how do you happen to know this? "

" Why, my lord, servants will get talking together — I hope your lordship will not be angry — "

" No, no; I shall look over it. Go on. Perhaps her ladyship's maids — "

"That is exactly what it is, my lord. It was only yesterday they were telling me," continued Makepeace, "how her ladyship speaks to them of your lordship when they are alone together."

"Her ladyship does not suspect, does she — come, tell me the truth now — I know you would not deceive me — but does her ladyship suspect anything about this?" and the earl significantly twitched the hair fringe of his nightcap with his finger and thumb.

"Not for a moment, my lord," ejaculated Makepeace. "On the contrary, her ladyship was telling her maids the other day — But I am afraid I shall give your lordship offence."

"No, no, I will overlook this little gossiping. I know that it does take place amongst servants. Go on. What did her ladyship say?"

"That your lordship actually looked younger than my Lord Osmond."

"Ah! she said that, did she?" exclaimed the earl, his wrinkled countenance expanding into one elaborate grin of satisfaction. "You know, Makepeace, there has been a great coolness between me and my son since my marriage. All the estates, as you are aware, are not entailed, and of course I have the power of leaving them to whomsoever I think fit."

"It was very wrong of his lordship," said Makepeace, "if I may be so bold as to offer an opinion, to show any disrespect toward your lordship, because having won the affections of a young and beautiful lady, your lordship chose to consult your own happiness by espousing her ladyship."

"It was very wrong," exclaimed the earl. "But between you and me, I was not sorry to have an opportunity to forbid my son the house. You see, Makepeace, it is rather an awkward thing where there is a youthful mother-in-law and an equally youthful stepson. The world is so scandalous, and then, too, it is always better to be prudent. There is another reason likewise. Lord Osmond looks older than he really is, and it makes me look older in consequence. But as for the former part of my reasoning, her ladyship, you know, is virtue personified."

"If I might be permitted the expression, my lord," answered Makepeace, "her ladyship can only be on this earth by some extraordinary mistake. It is not her sphere, my lord. Her ladyship is an angel."

"Exactly so," cried the old nobleman. "Don't you think, Makepeace, I ought to be the happiest man in the world?"

"If I were to give free expression to my thoughts, my lord," rejoined the valet, "I should say that this world ought to appear a perfect paradise in your lordship's eyes."

"And so it does, Makepeace, — a perfect paradise, an Elysium of the most delicious flowers. Give me my wig."

The valet could scarcely suppress a smile for a moment, at the ludicrous transition of his lordship's ideas from the Elysium of flowers to his wig, but that smile was not caught by the earl's eye, as it instantaneously vanished from the countenance of Makepeace.

"Now, I think, I look as I ought to do," said the nobleman whose toilet, having progressed during the preceding colloquy, was by this time brought to a termination. "Are you sure that this new peruke does not look new?"

"Not at all, my lord," replied Makepeace; "it becomes your lordship admirably."

"And yet it strikes me," said the earl, dubiously, "that it is a shade lighter than the one I have been recently wearing. Put them together, and give me your opinion."

The valet did as he was desired, but purposely held the old wig in such a light against the new one that the earl's eye should not detect the difference. The latter was, however, in reality a shade or two lighter than the former, but Makepeace spoke so confidently in the opposite sense, that his lordship, who took his valet's word to be gospel in all toilet matters, was satisfied, and assuming as jaunty and debonair a demeanour as possible, he descended to the breakfast-parlour.

CHAPTER XXXI

THE COUNTESS OF LASCELLES

LET us now change the scene to another room in the same mansion, and to a much later hour in the day. It was a sumptuously furnished apartment, and the time was two o'clock.

The Countess of Lascelles sat upon a sofa in a thoughtful mood. She was alone, and the perfect immovability of her form and features for a period of several minutes indicated how completely she was absorbed in her reflections. Her exquisitely symmetrical figure was inclined toward the immense velvet-covered cushion on which her elbow rested, the hand supporting the head. The luxuriant tresses of her auburn hair, rich and glossy, floated in natural undulations over her shoulders, and a few straggling curls lay like burnished gold on her pure white throat. Exquisitely beautiful was her countenance, as we have already described it, for she was the lady, as the reader comprehends, whom Clement Redcliffe saw on his visit to Covent Garden Market, and in whose proceedings with the handsome young man he became so much interested. There was a deep pensiveness in her large clear blue eyes, and yet after the lapse of a few minutes a soft smile appeared upon the roses of the well-cut lips, partially revealing the pearly whiteness of the teeth. It would have been evident to an observer — if one were nigh — that though pensive, her thoughts were not altogether fraught with melancholy, but that there was a roseate light shining softly through.

As she sat half-reclining upon that sofa, the dark velvet covering threw out her well-defined and faultlessly symmetrical shape. The voluptuous swell of the bust, the tapering of the waist, which seemed still more slender on account of the luxurious proportions of the bosom, the admirably sloping shoulders, the narrow sleeves, which did not altogether conceal the flowing outlines of the arms, and the sweeping length of the limbs, with two delicate feet peeping from beneath the skirt of the dress, and then, too, one exquisitely modelled hand, fair and white, with its tapering fingers, drooping listlessly and scarcely retaining the snowy cambric kerchief, a glimpse of the other hand amidst the showering masses of her auburn hair, — all constituted a protraiture calculated to ravish the senses of any one who beheld this charming creature.

Still she sat motionless, with her eyes fixed upon vacancy; but her thoughts were evidently busy, and as that soft smile appeared upon her lips, the roseate tint upon her damask cheeks gradually deepened into a crimson blush. Love was the subject of her thoughts, — but a love on which it was guilt to ponder, and she knew it. Nevertheless, love — even the guiltiest — has its pleasurable emotions, and vainly may the human heart endeavour to banish the feeling from its tabernacle. As well bid the light of the sun cease to shine in the temple to which it has penetrated, as well bid the moonbeams cease to glance kissingly on the rippling bosom of the ocean, as to bid love withdraw its soft lustre from the sanctuary of the heart into which it has succeeded in gaining admission, or to shed its light upon that heart which flutters beneath its influence.

But though Ethel was thus absorbed in reflections on a guilty love, was she herself already guilty? No, the last barrier which separated her from crime was not yet broken down; she hovered upon the brink of a precipice, but still she hovered; she might yet retreat ere she fell completely over. But would she withstand the temptation? On the one hand there was a husband whom she could not possibly love nor esteem, and whom she could scarcely prevent herself from absolutely detesting. So far as his caresses went, they were loathed as the pawings of an imp would be; his character was despised, and thus feeble indeed was the difference between the sentiment which Ethel already entertained toward him, and downright abhorrence. On the other hand, there was a young man of her own age, an Adonis of beauty, of elegant appearance, of lofty intelligence, of fascinating manners, and of captivating address. This young man adored her, worshipped the very ground on which she trod, loved her as woman is seldom loved. This she knew — this she felt. Oh, great was the danger in which Ethel Lascelles stood!

She was in the midst of her reverie, when the door opened, and a footman, entering, said, " If you please, your ladyship, Lord Osmond has called to see the earl, who is out."

The man's eye did not catch the deepening blush on the cheeks of his mistress at the mention of that young nobleman's name, because her countenance was not immediately turned toward him. With a mighty effort she regained her self-possession, and said in a quiet way, as if influenced by no extraordinary emotion, " Lord Osmond can wait, if he think fit, until the earl's return."

" His lordship requests an interview with your ladyship," replied the footman. " His lordship bade me say that he has a particular message to be delivered to the earl, and he hopes your ladyship will not refuse to take charge of it."

Ethel hesitated for a few moments, and then she said, in the same quiet tone as before, " You can show Lord Osmond up."

The footman bowed and retired, and in a few moments the earl's son was announced.

" Good heavens, what imprudence, Adolphus! " said the countess, in a tone of half-reproach and half-anxiety, but with ineffable tenderness over all, and her hand too was immediately clasped in Lord Osmond's as those words were spoken when the footman had again retired.

" Imprudence in coming to see you, dearest, dearest Ethel! " said the young nobleman, in a voice full of masculine harmony. " Oh, how can you breathe a syllable that seems tinged with reproach? " and as his fine large hazel eyes looked tenderly down into hers of blue, he kept her fair white hand clasped in his own.

" But your father, Adolphus, — my husband," she added, with a deep, mournful sigh. " Oh, my God! if he should suspect — And what must he think of your coming hither now? "

" Listen to me, Ethel," responded Lord Osmond, as he led his beautiful mother-in-law to a seat, and placed himself by her side, — that mother-in-law who was only just his own age, " I knew that my father was out; I saw him just now alight from the carriage at his club, but he did not observe me. I am well aware that when once amidst those with whom he can gossip after his own fashion, he will not speedily return. I came to the house under the pretext of seeing him; I sent up a message beseeching an audience of you. The servants can suspect nothing, and when my father comes home, you can tell him that I have been here. You can say that I am wearied and distressed on account of the coldness which subsists between him and me, that I seek his forgiveness, that if he will grant it, I am prepared to make any apology for whatsoever offence, real or imaginary, he may have conceived himself to have sustained at my hands — "

" And for what purpose, Adolphus, is all this? " inquired Ethel, with a half-frightened look, for though she put the question, she already more than comprehended the young nobleman's purpose.

" Oh, can you ask me? " he exclaimed, in a reproachful tone. " Does not your heart tell you it is in order that we may be together, — that I may have frequent opportunities of seeing her who is dearer to me than life itself. Ethel, I shall go mad if all this be not accomplished. Conceive what I have suffered for months and months past, catching only an occasional stolen interview, having to watch your movements in order to be blessed with a few minutes of discourse. And then, too," he added, gently and hesitatingly, " you promised a certain thing, and you kept not the appointment. Yesterday I awaited you there, and you came not! "

A burning blush appeared upon the cheeks of the countess, and her eyes, which swam in the deep languor of tenderness, were bent down as she murmured, " I thought better of it, Adolphus. My guardian angel inspired me with courage, and I resisted the temptation. For Heaven's sake, never again propose such a thing! Never again seek to draw me away from that path of duty which I must and will pursue."

The reader may now comprehend that the appointment which Clement Redcliffe had rightly conjectured to have been given when he beheld the tender pair in discourse on the terrace of Covent Garden Market was not kept.

" Ethel," resumed the enamoured young nobleman, " my destiny — my life are in your hands. I know as well as you do, all the guilt which attaches itself to such a love as ours, but I can no more struggle against it than I could breast the furious tide of the mightiest river as it rolls into the sea. Can you understand me when I tell you that if the Enemy of Mankind proffered me happiness in your arms as the price of my soul, I would sign the compact, — oh, sign it cheerfully, joyously."

" Good heavens, Adolphus, speak not in this dreadful manner! " murmured the countess, with a shudder sweeping over her frame, and yet with an irrepressible tenderness in the soft, melting eyes and on the passion-breathing lips.

" Dreadful? " ejaculated Adolphus; " is there anything dreadful in learning that you are the object of a love so devoted as mine? Oh, this love is all the world to me! Crown it with happiness, and the world becomes an Elysium. Doom me to despair, and the world is a blank, — no, a veritable hell," he added, with frightful emphasis, " from which I will fly as a wretched suicide! "

" Oh, my God, my God! what words are these? " murmured Ethel, and involuntarily, so to speak, or, rather, under the influence of an irresistible impulse, she threw herself in his arms, weeping and sobbing upon his breast.

" Dearest, dearest Ethel," he murmured, in the harmonious tone of love which sank down into the very depths of her soul, " you know not — oh, you know not — how very dear you are to me," and he imprinted a thousand impassioned kisses upon her lips, her burning cheeks, and her throbbing brows.

" Good heavens, if he should enter suddenly," ejaculated the countess, disengaging herself from Lord Osmond's enraptured embrace. " No, no, we must separate — you must depart. Not for an instant must you dream of coming to take up your abode beneath this roof again. We should stand the risk of betraying ourselves a thousand times in the day. It would be fatal to my reputation, — I cannot say to my happiness, for that is gone since I learned to love you."

" Oh, no; in love there is happiness," exclaimed Adolphus, in a fervid tone. " Love banishes all considerations; it holds everything cheap and light in comparison with the power and the immensity of its own sentiment. But listen to me, dearest Ethel, while I speak seriously and without excitement. Eighteen months have elapsed since you became the Countess of Lascelles. When you returned from the country after the honeymoon, you found me at this house. We had never seen each other before. I was in France when the marriage took place; I knew not even that it was contemplated until I received my father's letter to say that the ceremony was solemnized. He invited me not to it, and yet there was no coldness between us then."

"Wherefore recapitulate all these things," asked the countess, "which are so well known to me?"

"Because they will lead me on in a consecutive manner to what I have to explain as my purpose," responded the young nobleman. "Bear with me, Ethel; grant me your attention, I beseech you. We met, then, as I have said, for the first time when you returned from the country where the honeymoon was spent, and in this very apartment was it we looked each other in the face for that first time. I had heard that you were beautiful, but, good heavens! I had expected not to find myself in the presence of an angel. As if a lightning flash had darted in unto my soul, as if an inspiration had penetrated my brain, did the conviction strike me that it was I who should have led you to the altar, and that we were made to suit each other, though Heaven had ordained that you should become another's. I loved you at first sight; I could have fallen down and worshipped you as you stood there. No wonder, then, that for the few weeks which followed, my manner was abstracted, that I looked dull and unhappy, that I spoke petulantly to my father when he addressed me. And he, putting the worst construction on everything, thought me selfish and undutiful, fancing that my mind was occupied with ideas of filthy lucre, while it was absorbed in a devouring, maddening, frenzied passion. He taunted me with a sordid dislike to his marriage, on the ground that I feared lest some portion of his estates should pass away from me. No wonder that I was stricken dumb with the accusation, or that when I recovered the power of speech, my incoherent words, coupled with my still vacant and dismayed looks, should have seemed to justify his suspicions. But what could I tell him? Not the truth. I could not confess that I adored and worshipped his charming and beautiful wife. You know that I could not! He ordered me from the house, — this house in which he had not beheld my presence with pleasure from the first moment of his return with his bride. Since then, for more than a year, we have been estranged, and I have known not how to act. But have you forgotten the day, sweetest Ethel, when I met you by accident seven or eight months ago, and when under the influence of my impassioned love, I avowed all I felt? Have you forgotten how by your looks rather than by your words, you suffered me to understand that you had not seen me with indifference? And then, too, on those few occasions that we have since met, in those hurried and stolen interviews which I have managed to obtain, you have confessed the love which you feel for me—"

"Again, I ask you, Adolphus," inquired Ethel, glancing anxiously toward the door, "why all these recapitulations?"

"Listen, my beloved one, and you shall learn what I mean. I have already told you," continued Lord Osmond, "that I cannot possibly exist in this manner. I must see you often — constantly. If it be only to gaze upon your countenance, to hear the sound of your voice, and to press your hand occasionally, — these pleasures must I have. You will not deny them? This, then, is the plan I have formed: I will humble myself to my father; I will acknowledge a selfishness and a worldly-mindedness of which I never was guilty; I will beseech his forgiveness. He cannot refuse it. With all his numerous faults, he is not a man possessing a heart that can be termed unredeemably bad. You will tell him presently that finding he was not at home, I ventured to seek an interview with you, that I besought you to deliver to his ears the assurance of my contrition — "

"O Adolphus, it is impossible! We cannot live beneath the same roof," interrupted the countess, with the vehemence of one who felt that all her good resolutions were rapidly melting away, and who sought to regain them.

"Surely, surely, we can be upon our guard," said Lord Osmond, with a look and tone of the most earnest entreaty; "surely, surely, we can so control our looks, so measure our words, so bear ourselves to each other, as to defy suspicion? In my father's presence, I will be all respectful attention toward you — "

"O Adolphus," murmured the countess, "this love of ours will be fatal to me; it will be my destruction — I feel that it will. There is already a terrible presentiment of evil in my soul — "

"Banish it, Ethel, banish it, I beseech you," and the young nobleman grew more earnest and imploring in his pleadings. "Abandon not yourself to such groundless fears, such baseless misgivings. I tell you that we will be all circumspection in our conduct. But conceive the happiness, dearest Ethel, of living beneath the same roof, of breathing the same atmosphere — "

"No, Adolphus, it is impossible," exclaimed the countess, all her better feelings and all her fortitude suddenly reviving with greater power too than on any other occasion during this interview. "I have been standing on the brink of a precipice, and I will retreat in time. If you really love me, if you entertain the slightest spark of affection for me, impel me not over that brink, hurl me not down into the abyss beneath. No, no, it shall not be. Besides, Adolphus, it would be something shocking and revolting to think that you, the son, should live beneath the same roof with my husband, the father, and know that I am compelled to receive from him those caresses which you may not in honour bestow. My mind is made up. It will cost me many, many bitter pangs to renounce this love of yours, but it shall be done. And if I who am a woman can prove thus resolute, you, as a man, must show yourself even stronger still in the performance of a duty. Leave me, Adolphus; I entreat — I conjure — nay, I command that you leave me."

"Ethel, dearest Ethel, you are driving me to despair," and the young nobleman was frightfully distressed.

"And I too am in despair," rejoined the countess, "but my resolve is taken. It would be cruel, worse than cruel, ungenerous and unmanly for you, Adolphus, to attempt to turn me from my purpose. Leave me, I say."

"And my father?" inquired Lord Osmond, in a deep voice full of concentrated emotion, while his looks did indeed bespeak the despair which his lips had proclaimed; "what will you say to him? How will you account for my presence here to-day?"

"I will tell him all that you have suggested," was Ethel's quick and firm response, "but frankly do I inform you, Adolphus, that I shall speak in such a manner as to show that while I earnestly wish him to become friendly with you again, it is not my desire that you should return to dwell in this house."

With these words, the Countess of Lascelles rose abruptly from the sofa, and not daring to trust herself another moment with Adolphus, she rushed from the room. A few minutes afterward the young nobleman issued from the house, with a forced serenity of aspect, but with blank despair in his heart.

CHAPTER XXXII

THE EVENING PARTY

It was now the memorable Saturday evening on which Mrs. Macaulay was to give her party in honour of the reconciliation between herself and Mrs. Sifkin, who lived over the way. The number of guests had been duly borne in mind with regard to the preparations for the entertainment, but at about six o'clock Mrs. Macaulay gave another look at the eatables and drinkables, for the purpose of satisfying herself that there would be sufficient on the one hand, as well as that there should be no undue extravagance on the other. Opening a cupboard in her own front parlor, she contemplated a little array of five decanters, — two containing port, purchased at the rate of one and threepence a bottle at the oilman's who dealt in British wines, the next two containing sherry, procured at the same place and at the same price, and the fifth decanter being two-thirds full of brandy, which Mrs. Macaulay had not purchased at all, but which were the remains of a bottle that Mr. Redcliffe had no further use for.

" Let me see," said Mrs. Macaulay; " how many will there be of us altogether? " and she proceeded to tell off the expected guests on her fingers for about the twentieth time during this particular day. " There is the two Wanklins, Miss Spilsbury, and Captain Bluff; that's four. Then there's me and Master Ashton, for I know from what he said his sister won't come, so that makes six. Then there's Mrs. Dumpling, Mrs. Sifkin, Mr. Chubb (the sanctimonious humbug!) and Mr. Hogben; that makes ten. Then there's Mrs. Chowley and her two daughters — the conceited chits! — and that makes thirteen. Thirteen people, and four bottles of wine. Each bottle ten glasses; that's forty glasses, to be divided by thirteen. Well, it will give three apiece, and just leave a drain at the bottom of each decanter for gentility's sake. Because then comes the brandy, the hot water and sugar — and I am not quite clear but that there's rather too much wine."

Mrs. Macaulay stood gazing dubiously for a few minutes on the little array of decanters, pondering whether she should suppress the production of one of port or one of sherry, and there was even a moment when she actually thought of keeping back one of each. But then she remembered that she had promised to do the thing handsomely and come out with a genteel little spread, so she decided upon keeping back nothing at all, and going the whole hog with her extravagance and profusion for once in a way. Having arrived at this decision, she hastened down-stairs to inspect the larder, and having cast a look over its contents, she soliloquized after the following fashion:

"Cold veal pie at the head of the table, — large enough to bear at least thirteen helps. Then there's four dozen of oysters ordered for nine o'clock — But dear me! what if the best part of the company should take a fancy to oysters? I sha'n't touch any for one, but there are twelve who might, and how many would that give to each? Four dozen is forty-eight, and twelves into forty-eight go four. That would be only four oysters apiece."

At this awful calculation the worthy lady looked somewhat blank, and she was even deliberating whether she should not send forth to order an extra two dozen of oysters, when she again plunged her looks into the larder, and went on soliloquizing.

"Fried sausages and mashed potatoes for the bottom of the table, and the oysters to go in the middle. The spread, after all, would be genteel and liberal enough. Susan," she exclaimed, turning around to one of the maids, "did Mr. Redcliffe give orders for his dinner to-morrow, as he always does on Saturday night for the Sunday?"

"Yes, ma'am," was the response. "He said, as usual, that we were to get him what we liked, so as he wasn't troubled about it, only that he didn't want any more poultry for the present."

"Then that's capital," cried Mrs. Macaulay, her countenance becoming radiant. "There's this fowl that he's only eaten a wing of for to-day's dinner, and which he won't think of having up again. I am sure I should be the last person in the world to make use of it if I wasn't certain that he would not want it. And as for leaving it here to get as dry as a stick by Monday morning, and then be told that he didn't wish to see it brought up to table again, — it would be quite a sin. So I tell you what, Susan, cut it up; make the one wing look as much like two as possible, by dividing the pinion, and broil it all with mushroom sauce. There are some pickled mushrooms in a bottle somewhere. Yes, after all it will be a beautiful little supper, and I know Mrs. Dumpling will be ready to bite her own head off with envy and jealousy when she thinks of her own trumpery suppers of stale tarts and currant wine."

Having arrived at all these very comfortable and satisfactory conclusions, Mrs. Macaulay gave out the tea, coffee, and sugar, as well as the silver tea-spoons, which she carefully counted, and with many injunctions against breaking any of the best china tea-service, she sailed forth from the kitchen. Ascending to her chamber, which was behind the parlour, she performed her toilet, and at five minutes before seven she lighted the mould candles in the sitting-room just named. Then, in all the glory of a new black silk gown, a cap with pink ribbons, her gold watch and chain, and a large fan which she had won in a sixpenny raffle twenty-five years previously, she took her seat to await the presence of the company. At five minutes past seven there was a double knock at the door, and the servant ushered in Mr. and Mrs. Wanklin, — the former a short, sedate, sentimental-looking, pale-faced man in spectacles, the latter a tall, stately, consequential dame, and both of "a certain age." They dwelt in the neighbourhood, Mr. Wanklin keeping a circulating library on one side of a little shop, and Mrs. Wanklin a Berlin wool emporium by means of the window, shelves, and counter of the opposite side. This arrival was speedily followed by that of Miss Spilsbury, a tall, gaunt maiden lady of fifty, with a hatchet face and a demure look, a brown false front, and a slate-coloured silk dress, very scanty in the skirt. She had an independence of seventy-five pounds a year, and was therefore much thought of by her friends and acquaintances. She was followed by Mr. Chubb, the parish clerk, a stout, bald-headed, pragmatic individual, sententious in his speech, and sepulchral in his tone. Then came Mrs. Chowley and the two Miss Chowleys, — the mamma being a young widow of fifty-six or so, and "the girls" (as she called them) being respectively thirty-two and thirty. This delightful family kept a baby-linen warehouse in the Tottenham Court Road, and as Mrs. Chowley's brother was butler in a duke's family, and her great-grandfather had been coachman to some other duke in the time of George II, the said delightful family was considered exceedingly aristocratic in all its connections and associations.

Scarcely were the Chowleys seated, when there was a terrific knock and violent ring at the front door, and Captain Bluff was in a few moments announced. This was a guest of whom Mrs. Macaulay had reason to be proud, on account of the prefix of "captain," although the gallant officer himself did not wear any particular uniform, for the simple reason that none is worn by the commanders of the Gravesend steam-packets, to which service Captain Bluff was honourably attached. The captain — who was a red-faced, weather-beaten man, dressed all in blue, with a blue-checked shirt — was warmly greeted by his hostess, and duly presented to the other guests, to whom he was previously unknown. At first the Miss Chowleys — who were very ugly and very affected, and imbued with the most exquisite appreciation of everything which was aristocratic and genteel — thought it necessary to be amazingly disgusted, inasmuch as the captain brought with him an unmistakable odour of rum and strong Cubas, but their looks and their manner changed all in a moment, when Mrs. Macaulay hastily whispered to them aside, that her very particular friend Captain Bluff had a few pounds in the Funds and was a single man; so that the young ladies most amiably made room for this jolly young bachelor of eight and forty to sit between them on one side of the fireplace.

The captain's arrival was promptly followed by that of Mrs. Dumpling, who was a stout, red-faced, important dame, very fond of mixing herself up in her neighbours' concerns, very much given to gossiping and scandal, and equally so to strong waters, whether gin, rum, brandy, or shrub. On entering the apartment, she cast her looks around, and then fixing her gaze significantly upon Mrs. Macaulay, said, "So she has not come yet?"

"Why, I dare say," was the answer of the worthy hostess, "that Mrs. Sifkin wants you all to be assembled first, and gives you time for the purpose, so that her own appearance may have a becoming effect. And it's very right and proper on her part too, because, you know," added Mrs. Macaulay, looking around, "that Mrs. Sifkin is in duty bound to offer me her hand first when she enters the room."

Hereupon a discussion arose, — Mr. Chubb, the parish clerk, gravely and sententiously expressing his opinion that as Mrs. Macaulay was the hostess, and as she had already received an apology from Mrs. Sifkin, conveyed through Mrs. Dumpling, it was only consistent with good breeding that Mrs. Macaulay should be foremost in welcoming her late enemy. Mr. Wanklin was of the same sentiment, which he confirmed by a quotation from a novel in his own circulating library; Mrs. Chowley followed on the same side, observing that from her connections she had peculiar opportunities of laying down the law of etiquette on such a delicate point. This remark enabled the elder Miss Chowley — who had already set her cap at the captain — to seize the occasion of whispering in his ear that her uncle was butler in a duke's household, and that her great-great-grandfather had been coachman to some other duke; whereat Captain Bluff expressed his admiration by a knowing wink, and looked toward the cupboard as if he were longing to make himself acquainted with its contents. However, it was finally settled that Mrs. Macaulay should present her hand to Mrs. Sifkin whensoever that lady might make her appearance, and though Mrs. Macaulay outwardly yielded with an excellent grace, she inwardly vowed eternal animosity thenceforth to all present who had conspired to force her into such a degradation.

"I don't think we are all here yet?" said Mrs. Dumpling, in a bland whisper to Mrs. Macaulay, "for I recollect you told me — "

"No, we are not all here yet," interrupted the lady thus appealed to, as she drew herself up in a dignified manner. "There's Mr. Hogben to come, — the gentleman, you know, who was for twenty years in the service of the late king and that of her present Majesty, but who suddenly had a fortune left him."

Here it may be as well to inform the reader that Mr. Hogben, whose official services under the Crown were so magnificently paraded, had for twenty years filled the honourable though onerous, bustling, and not very lucrative situation of two-penny postman, but by a sudden windfall inheriting a few thousand pounds, he had set up as a gentleman and was now living on his means.

Scarcely had Mrs. Macaulay ceased speaking, when an unmistakable postman's knock caused the whole company to start, with the exception of Captain Bluff, who was never known to start at anything, not even when his steamer upset a wherry and drowned three people while working its way through the crowded mazes of the Pool.

" That's Mr. Hogben," cried Mrs. Macaulay. " Dear me! that a gentleman in his situation should give such a knock. But it's all the force of habit, and quite natural enough, Lord bless us! "

" Amen! " said Mr. Chubb, the parish clerk, in his deep, sepulchral voice, and the utterance of the word was another illustration of that force of habit which Mrs. Macaulay had just been commenting upon.

Mr. Hogben made his appearance, and a very remarkable one it was too. He was a thin, wiry individual, dressed out in a style which even the Miss Chowleys whisperingly declared to be the very pink of fashion, and he glided into the room with a quick, shambling gait, just as postmen are seen to adopt as they shuffle rapidly along the streets, pursuing their professional avocations from one house door to another.

" And still we are not complete," said Mrs. Dumpling to Mrs. Macaulay, when Mr. Hogben, having taken a seat next to Mrs. Chowley, began to pay very marked attention to this dashing young widow of fifty-six.

" No, not yet," responded the hostess to Mrs. Dumpling's remark; then raising her voice for the behoof of all the company, she added, " I am certain of having the pleasure of introducing to you a young gentleman — ahem! — secretary to his Grace the Duke of Marchmont, and of course the duke's very particular and intimate friend. Only conceive the pleasure and happiness of living constantly with a duke."

" As my uncle does now," said the elder Miss Chowley, thus alluding to the relative who served as a ducal butler.

"And as our ancestor did before him," added the younger Miss Chowley, thus, with a proud family satisfaction, referring to her great-great-grandfather who was a ducal coachman.

"Well, I never seed a dook to my knowledge in all my life," said Captain Bluff, who spoke in a very hoarse voice, "except it was at the figger-head of a ship, and that was a wooden dook — old Vellington."

The conversation was interrupted by the maid's announcement of "Mr. Ashton," and Christian made his appearance.

"And where, my very dear young friend," cried Mrs. Macaulay, when the usual compliments were exchanged, "is that charming sister of yours. What! she couldn't come? Oh, dear me! I am so disappointed. But I suppose — ahem! — Lady Octavian Meredith couldn't spare her? Mr. Ashton's sister," added the worthy woman, looking around upon her guests, "is the bosom friend — ahem! — of Lady Octavian Meredith, and I am sure you are all as much disappointed as I am that she cannot come."

Of course there was a universal expression of feeling in accordance with Mrs. Macaulay's remark, and Christian, as a duke's secretary, and having a sister who was bosom friend to a titled lady, at once became the lion of the party.

Another knock and ring now produced a greater sensation than any previous summons at the front door, for every one present felt assured that this must be Mrs. Sifkin. And Mrs. Sifkin it was who made her appearance in the shape of a little vinegar-looking, sharp-eyed, angular-featured woman, with carroty hair. She was very plainly dressed, and seemed every inch of her the griping, greedy, cheese-paring lodging-house keeper. Her thin lips were tightly compressed, and she had evidently made up her mind to treat Mrs. Macaulay with just as much civility or reserve, as the case might be, which she should experience at that lady's hands. There was a solemn silence as the two rivals stood in the presence of each other, but when Mrs. Macaulay extended her hand and bade Mrs. Sifkin consider herself to be quite at home, the guests signified their applause by what would be termed "a sensation" on the part of a public meeting. Then the vinegar aspect of Mrs. Sifkin relaxed, and she smiled in as honeyed a manner as such a countenance could possibly smile. Nothing then could exceed the love and friendship, the esteem and affection, which all in a moment sprang up between the late rivals and enemies. Mrs. Macaulay thought it becoming to get up a little cry, sobbingly vowing that she had always regarded Mrs. Sifkin with a sisterly love although they were at daggers drawn; to which Mrs. Sifkin replied that as a true Christian she had never failed to remember Mrs. Macaulay in her prayers. This assertion elicited a deep, sepulchral "Amen!" from the parish clerk, a quotation from a Minerva-press novel on the part of Mr. Wanklin, the circulating-library keeper, and a subdued expression which sounded very much like "Humbug!" from the throat of Captain Bluff.

Things however were now upon a most amiable footing. Mrs. Macaulay rang for tea and coffee, and sat herself down at the table to preside over the festive scene. Plates of thin bread and butter, toast, and seed-cake (this being cut up in thirteen very small slices) were placed upon the board; the cups "which cheered without inebriating" were passed around, to the satisfaction of all present save that of Captain Bluff, who, though he tossed off a cup of coffee at one draught, had all his thoughts settled upon rum. When the tea things were cleared away, there was a round game, from which, however, Mr. Chubb, the parish clerk, requested to be omitted, on the ground that it was inconsistent with the solemnity and piety of his clerical calling, and he remembered also that he had a few baptismal certificates to fill up at home. So, having been careful to ascertain at what hour supper would be on table, he begged to be excused in the meanwhile.

The round game progressed very well without him, and was only once disturbed by an insinuation on the part of Mrs. Sifkin that Mrs. Dumpling had purloined some of her fish, but the former lady suffered herself to be appeased by the circumstance of Captain Bluff considerately giving her a handful of his own, — an act of kindness which was performed just in time to save Mrs. Dumpling from the disagreeable ordeal of having her eyes scratched out by her vixenish accuser. Christian might have made a similar accusation, and with considerable truth, too, if he had chosen, against Miss Spilsbury, for if this highly respectable maiden lady, who lived upon an independence and was considered "quite genteel," kept very quiet in respect to her tongue, she was very busy with her fingers, and every time she thought Christian was not looking, she pilfered his fish, endeavouring to conceal the theft under a short cough and a fumbling for her pocket-handkerchief. Christian, however, suffered himself to be robbed with a most exemplary patience, — a circumstance which raised him so high in Miss Spilsbury's estimation that, when the round game was over, she whispered to Mrs. Macaulay, loud enough for him to overhear, that he was the nicest young man she had ever met in all her life.

The round game being finished, the maid entered to lay the cloth for supper, and Mr. Chubb, the parish clerk, now reappeared, smelling very strong of tobacco smoke, looking very red in the face, and having a certain watery, vacant stare about the eyes. This, however, would not have occasioned any wonder on the part of the company, if they had known that instead of retiring into the bosom of his own family to write out baptismal certificates, he had been all the time in the hot parlour of the public-house around the corner, smoking his pipe and moistening his lips with three successive pints of strong old Kennet ale, — a proceeding which the ecclesiastical gentleman doubtless regarded as far more innocent and likewise as more orthodox than joining in a round game of " commerce."

While the servant was laying the cloth, Mrs. Macaulay affected to be conversing in a perfectly calm and untroubled manner, though in reality she was watching askance every movement and arrangement of her domestic, for fear lest she should do something wrong, and she could not help interspersing her conversation with frequent hints and orders to the girl.

" Well, as I was saying," Mrs. Macaulay observed, " it would be impossible to have a nicer or better lodger than Mr. Redcliffe. He never troubles himself about — the pepper box on that side, Jane — what he is going to have for dinner, as long as his meals are served up regular. He is very quiet, — the mustard in this corner, Jane, — talks very little to anybody, — look! the cloth is all tumbled, — but is out a great deal. I am sure for the life of me I don't know what he can always be doing with himself,— do take care, Jane! — and the other night he stayed out so very late I was quite frightened — the pie at this end, Jane."

"Genelmen will stay out late sometimes," observed Captain Bluff, and he winked knowingly at the first male countenance which met his eye at the moment, and which happened to be that of Mr. Chubb, the parish clerk, who instantaneously put on an air of indignation, which, inasmuch as it was a tipsy one, only had the effect of making Captain Bluff burst out into a shout of uproarious laughter.

"Did you mean that look and that laugh for me, sir?" inquired Mr. Chubb, in the deepest of his sepulchral tones, and endeavouring to appear very awfully solemn indeed.

"Well, I did, and that's the truth on't," returned Captain Bluff; "so you can put it in your pipe and smoke it, and if so be it's a sort of bakker you ain't used to, you must make the best of the bargian."

Here Mr. Chubb rose from his seat, and was either about to appeal to the company or else to make a personal assault upon Captain Bluff, when the elder Miss Chowley threw herself between them, and availed herself of the opportunity to get up a most interesting little tragedy of affright, entreaty, and hysterical symptoms, not forgetting to implore the captain to master his temper and spare her feelings.

"Oh, let him get the steam up," vociferated Bluff; "he's precious cranky and will soon bust his biler."

Mr. Chubb looked around with awe-inspiring dismay. The idea that a parish clerk should be thus insulted — thus outraged. What would the world come to next? This dreadful question did Mr. Chubb's countenance appear to ask, in default of the power of his tongue to say anything at all.

"Come, old feller," said Bluff, who was really a very good-natured man, "I didn't mean to offend you. If that there twenty-horse power steam-ingin which is working in your buzzum goes too fast, ease her and stop her, but don't go for to keep down the safety-walve with the sartainty of busting outright in a minute or two. Here, tip us your paddle, and let's sit down to mess as good friends."

"Amen!" groaned Mr. Chubb, as he extended the hand which, figuratively described as a paddle, the gallant captain had so bluntly solicited.

Supper was now served up. The veal pie stood at the head of the table, the dish of oysters in the middle, the sausages and mashed potatoes at the bottom. The broiled fowl, with the mushroom sauce, looked very handsome as a side dish, and in order to correspond therewith, the thoughtful servant had placed on the opposite side an apple tart, which had been made for Mr. Redcliffe's dinner on the morrow, but which the said thoughtful Jane had taken it into her head might just as well figure on her mistress's supper-table for this particular occasion. She then glanced half-smilingly and half-apprehensively at Mrs. Macaulay, to assure herself that this little prudential arrangement met the worthy lady's approbation, and the quick but scarcely perceptible nod which her mistress gave placed her perfectly at her ease.

"Now, ladies and gentlemen, pray be seated," said Mrs. Macaulay. "You see I treat you without ceremony; it is merely a humble repast, but such as it is, you are quite welcome," and as she thus spoke, she glanced askance at Mrs. Dumpling to see how that lady regarded the display.

But so far from Mrs. Dumpling being ready through envy or jealousy to bite her own head off, — as Mrs. Macaulay had ere now anticipated, — the sort of readiness she did exhibit was a strong yearning to commence an attack on the sausages and mashed potatoes. The company seated themselves, and, to Mrs. Macaulay's infinite relief, the oysters, so far from being in general request, were only rendered available for the appetites of a few, so that she had no fear of an insufficiency of that particular portion of the repast.

"What for you, Mr. Chubb?" inquired Mrs. Macaulay, when she had seen that the ladies were becomingly cared for. "Shall it be pie? I can recommend it."

"Amen," responded the parish clerk, who had just emptied his tumbler of ale and had beckoned the girl to refill it.

"And you, Captain Bluff?" said Mrs. Macaulay, with her most amiable smile.

"Sassengers and meshed taturs for me, ma'am," was the captain's response. "Always begin with the hot things and wind up with cold uns. Leave the coldest till last, 'cos why they lays easier on t'other foundation. So I'll have sassengers fust; then I'll pitch into the briled fowl, arterward I'll taste the meat pie, and I'll wind up with a dozen or so of them hoysters, with maybe a bit of the thingumbob on t'other side of the table," thus alluding to the fruit tart.

There was now a pause, of which Mrs. Macaulay took advantage to say in an impressive manner, "Jane, you have forgotten to put the port and sherry on the table."

Here the worthy hostess again looked furtively at Mrs. Dumpling, but this excellent lady was so busy with the food upon her plate that she had really no time nor thought for that envy and jealousy which Mrs. Macaulay had been anxious to provoke, and therefore the absence of those feelings on Mrs. Dumpling's part rather chagrined and annoyed Mrs. Macaulay than otherwise.

The wine was produced, and Mrs. Macaulay begged the ladies and gentlemen to take care of themselves.

"I don't know whether you like port that is fruity, Mr. Chubb," she said, "but my wine-merchant assured me that this was of the very best quality, and I don't mind whispering in your ear that it is the same which he supplies to the Duke of Wellington's table."

This whispered assurance was, however, loud enough to be caught by the ear of every one present, and Mrs. Dumpling, who was at the moment handing her plate for a third supply of sausages and mashed potatoes, had leisure to bridle up and exchange a malicious look with Mrs. Sifkin, as much as to imply that this was a mere romance of their dearly beloved and excellent hostess about her wine. Mrs. Macaulay, who saw what was passing, nevertheless affected to be perfectly innocent on the subject, though she inwardly vowed to cut Mrs. Dumpling from the very moment after their shaking hands when the hour for departure should come, and she was equally resolute to pick another quarrel with Mrs. Sifkin on the following day.

"Try the sherry, Mr. Ashton," she said, still maintaining all the winning urbanity proper to the hospitable founder of a feast. "By the bye, how very extraordinary! this is some of the identical wine which is supplied to your friend the Duke of Marchmont. You surely must recognize it? You must have tasted the same quality at his Grace's table?"

Now, in making this earnest appeal to our youthful hero, Mrs. Macaulay had two distinct objects to gain. One was to elicit such an answer as would confirm the impression she wished to convey about the excellence of her wine, and the other was to stand on a pedestal in the estimation of her guests at thus being on such intimate terms with the friend and companion of a duke. But Christian was both too honest and too inexperienced in the ways of the world to be coaxed and wheedled into a falsehood for the behoof of

Mrs. Macaulay's pride and vanity, so he answered, with great ingenuousness and naïveté, "Really I am no judge of wine, though this seems sweeter than any sherry I have ever tasted before, and as for the duke's table, of course I don't dine at it; I take my meals with the steward."

Mrs. Dumpling and Mrs. Sikfin exchanged rapid but malicious glances, and the Miss Chowleys tossed their heads, as much as to infer that Christian was nothing so very great after all, and that they were not quite sure he was anything better than their uncle who was a duke's butler, or their ancestor who had been a duke's coachman. Mrs. Macaulay, for the moment thrown into confusion by young Ashton's unsophisticated response, appeared to be suddenly seized with an inclination to dive deep into the mysteries of the pie before her, and fortunately Captain Bluff came out with something comical in the course of a minute, so that the conversation was turned and Mrs. Macaulay recovered her good spirits.

The comestibles were disposed of, and literally so, for every dish was emptied, Mrs. Dumpling eating enough for any six moderate feeders, and Captain Bluff partaking of everything, finishing the oysters, and winding up with a plate of apple tart. The brandy was now placed upon the board. The conversation grew more animated; Captain Bluff became more and more uproarious, and flung amatory glances upon the elder Miss Chowley. The consequence was that this young lady, who for the last sixteen years — indeed ever since she was sixteen — had been looking out for a husband, felt assured she was in a fair way to obtain one at last, and when the captain, under the influence of the bad wine, frequent tumblers of ale, and his second glass of brandy and water, trod accidentally with his heavy boot upon her toe, at the same time (but this was purposely done) whispering some joke about the baby-linen warehouse, Miss Chowley felt that her conquest was complete. She whispered a few words to her mamma, who in order to listen to her eldest "girl" was compelled for the moment to leave off listening to the tender whispers of Mr. Hogben, the enriched twopenny postman, and the result of the whispering between the mamma and the daughter was that the latter conveyed to the captain an invitation (also in a whisper) to tea on the following evening.

" Blow me tight," vociferated Bluff, " if I wouldn't come and tackle your mess-table with the greatest pleasure, but to-morrow there's a excursion down to Margate with my boat, and I must be on the paddle-box from nine in the morning till nine at night."

Miss Chowley blushed red as a peony at the stentorian manner in which her whispered invitation to tea was thus proclaimed to the whole company, and Miss Spilsbury — the tall, gaunt maiden lady — drew up her form with a prudishness which made it look still taller and more gaunt than it was before.

But this little incident was quickly succeeded by another which attracted general notice. Mrs. Dumpling, who had a keen eye to the spirits, saw that the brandy was so rapidly disappearing she must make haste and finish her first tumbler in order to have a chance of obtaining a second, and in doing this, some of the hot, steaming fluid went what is called " the wrong way." So poor Mrs. Dumpling became almost convulsed with a violent fit of coughing, and looked as if she were going off in an apoplectic fit.

" Tap her on the back," cried Mrs. Sifkin.

" Cut her stay-lace," exclaimed Mrs. Wanklin.

" Throw water into her face," said Mrs. Macaulay, with an air of deepest concern, and inwardly hoping that some one would at once follow out the suggestion by dashing a tumbler full of the cold fluid in the choking lady's countenance.

" Ease her," cried Captain Bluff, in a voice as loud and hoarse as if he were roaring from the top of the paddle-box to the boy stationed at the hatchway of the engine-room. " Stop her. Don't let her go ahead like that 'ere. By jingo, she's gone down starn foremost! " he vociferatingly added, as the unfortunate Mrs. Dumpling tumbled off her chair.

Mr. Chubb, the parish clerk, instantaneously endeavoured to raise the worthy dame, but he tumbled down likewise, for truth compels us to declare that this very orthodox gentleman was now excessively drunk.

" That's all the effect of your good wine, ma'am," roared Captain Bluff, with a shout of laughter. " Their bilers is busted, their ingins is all stopped, they're reglarly brandy-logged. I knowed how it would be. They must ile their wheels well for theirselves afore they'll go agin."

At first Mrs. Macaulay was inclined to be very indignant and to seem very much disgusted at this exhibition on the part of Mrs. Dumpling and the parish clerk, but the compliment conveyed by Captain Bluff in respect to her wine not merely appeased her in a moment, but made her look upon the scene with a complaisant and satisfied air. Mrs. Dumpling was speedily raised up in the brawny arms of Captain Bluff, while Christian performed the same kind office for Mr. Chubb.

"I'm afeard you're wery drunk, sir," said the captain, now finding leisure to address this observation with John Bull bluntness and seamanlike frankness to the discomfited parish clerk, "wery drunk indeed, sir! and I likes for to see it. Shows you've been enjoying yourself."

"Amen!" gutturally hiccoughed Mr. Chubb.

"Do, my dear young friend," said Mrs. Macaulay to Christian, "see the poor man home. He lives in Duke Street, next door, you know, to the baker's where you used to deal when you lived here."

"I will see him home with much pleasure," replied young Ashton. "But do you think he can stand?"

"Stand?" echoed Chubb, and the next moment he began rapping out such a series of profane oaths that the Miss Chowleys shrieked in dismay, and Mrs. Chowley was so much overcome that she fell into the arms of Mr. Hogben, who kindly offered to deliver her at her own door, though perhaps it would prove the weightiest letter he had ever in all his experience had so to deliver. As for Miss Spilsbury, she pursed up her mouth with supreme disgust, while Mrs. Sifkin whispered to Mrs. Wanklin that if people would cheat their guests with wine at one and three pence, making them believe it cost five shillings a bottle, it was no wonder such consequences should ensue.

In the midst of the confusion Christian managed to get the parish clerk out of the room, and anon out of the house, but scarcely had he been thus conducted into the fresh air, when Mr. Chubb seemed doggedly determined to sit down upon the front-door steps, and with sundry imprecations invoked against his own eyes and limbs, he persisted in pulling off his coat and high-lows, with the idea that he was in his own chamber and about to get into bed. Christian experienced the greatest trouble in lifting him up again, and as he led the parish clerk along, this inebriate gentleman shouted forth a strange medley, consisting of portions of the hundredth psalm and of a bacchanalian song, so that it was fortunate indeed they encountered no policeman, or Mr. Chubb might have passed the remainder of the night in the station-house.

Ultimately our young hero succeeded in getting the parish clerk to his own door, which they thus reached as some adjacent church clock was proclaiming the hour of midnight. It was a private house, for Mr. Chubb was a schoolmaster, and his schoolroom was at the back part of the premises, with an entrance from another street. A light was burning in the front parlour, and the moment Christian knocked at the door that light disappeared, so that he knew his summons was to be at once attended to. He heard a chain let fall within, and the door was opened. But Christian was seized with amazement at the first glance which he threw upon the being who thus opened that door. She was a young creature of not more than sixteen, and of the most ravishing beauty. That same glance showed him too that there was an air of superiority about her, — a natural gentility which forbade the thought that she could be the daughter of the parish clerk. Yet she was plainly though neatly dressed, and thus so far as her apparel went, she might have belonged to the Chubb family. But Christian felt convinced she did not. There was as much difference between the clumsy vulgarity of Mr. Chubb and the exquisite gentility of this charming creature as there is between the uncouth carthorse and the thoroughbred.

The parish clerk was leaning against the railings in front of the house, his hat cocked over his left ear, his white cravat loosened and in disorder, and his lips giving forth incoherent mutterings, in which the words "vestry," "hundredth psalm," "praise and glory," blended with an oath or two, were alone intelligible.

"I am sorry," said Christian, lifting his hat to the young creature whose beauty so ravished him, "that you should be compelled to gaze on such a spectacle as this."

The young girl advanced upon the threshold, held forward the light which she carried in her hand, and now saw more plainly than she did at first, in what condition Mr. Chubb had been brought home. Her countenance, hitherto remarkable for its softness, and characterized by the sweetest amiability of look, rapidly assumed an expression of mingled astonishment, indignation, and disgust, but suddenly bethinking herself that some answer was due to Christian's courteous remark, she said, with a well-bred affability, blended with the sweetest virginal modesty, " And I on my part, sir, am sorry that you should have had so unpleasant a task to perform."

" What's the matter? " cried a shrill, vixenish, female voice from the top of the staircase; " what's the matter, I say, Miss Vincent? "

" Ah," thought Christian to himself, " she is not, then, the daughter of these people," and he felt an indescribable and at the moment unaccountable satisfaction at receiving this confirmation of his previous idea upon the subject.

" It is Mr. Chubb," answered the young lady, for such indeed did she appear to be, and she spoke with an amiable sweetness, mingled, however, with a visible timidity and trepidation.

" Then why doesn't Mr. Chubb come in? " demanded the same shrill voice which had already spoken from the head of the staircase. " And who are you a-talking to there, Miss Vincent? "

" A young gentleman has been kind enough," she answered, " to see Mr. Chubb home."

" Oh, I understand all about it," cried the shrill voice; " he's drunk — the beast! "

At this coarse, though really not altogether uncalled for remark, the countenance of the beautiful Miss Vincent flushed again, as if the natural delicacy of her soul were shocked at the woman's grossness, and the quick, furtive look which she threw at Christian showed him how pained she felt at being thus seen in any sort of connection with such low-bred persons. The youth, however, glanced toward her with a mingled admiration and sympathy, which proved that he felt for her, and that so far from thinking the worse of her for being in that house, he commiserated her on account of the circumstances, whatsoever they might be, which had thus thrown her in the companionship of the Chubb family.

Mrs. Chubb now made her appearance, in the form of a tall, gawky, lean woman, with a very sour aspect, and indeed a forbidding look. She was only half-dressed, and was in her nightcap, having evidently emerged from her couch.

" I am sure if I had expected this," she exclaimed, " when I went to bed, ill as I was, and asked you, Miss Vincent, to have the kindness to sit up for him — But see how the drunken brute is leaning against them railings. Isn't he a pretty feller to stand up to-morrow and ask others to jine in with him in singing to the praise and glory of God? Why, he'll have his eyes so bleared and red and blinking that he'll look like an owl in an ivy bush. Come along, do! " and she wound up her tirade by clutching her husband by the arm and shaking him violently.

Mr. Chubb, who evidently stood in mortal awe of his wife, was a trifle sobered by her presence and by the shaking process, so that he was enabled to stagger into the house.

" Thank'ee, young gentleman, for your attention," said Mrs. Chubb to our hero.

" Good night, sir," said Miss Vincent, in the sweet music of her soft voice.

" Good night," answered Christian, and as the door closed behind him, he walked slowly away, his imagination full of the beautiful creature whom he had thus seen at the parish clerk's house.

CHAPTER XXXIII

THE BOX

Precisely at nine o'clock on the ensuing Tuesday evening, Christian Ashton arrived in a cab at Madame Angelique's establishment. He alighted, and entering the shop, which was not as yet closed, gave his name to Madame Angelique's French deputy, who was behind the counter. The woman seemed at once to understand what she had to do, and in her broken English she informed Christian that if he would return to the cab, the box he had been sent for should be immediately brought out to him. In a few minutes this woman herself appeared, carrying the box, which was a large deal one, carefully corded, and the key was sealed up in a little parcel, which was likewise consigned to Christian's care.

The cab drove away, and as the driver had previously received his instructions from our hero, he proceeded straight to Mortimer Street. Mr. Redcliffe was at home, expecting Christian, and the youth himself carried the box up-stairs to Mr. Redcliffe's sitting apartment. He received a cordial welcome from that gentleman, who also inquired most kindly after his sister.

" I saw her this morning, sir," replied Christian, " and she was quite well. She is, however, naturally grieved at the circumstance of my leaving town, because we shall be separated for a whole month. And now, Mr. Redcliffe, I have brought the box according to your instructions, and here is a little packet containing the key."

Redcliffe took the packet, examined the seal, and found that it was a common one, impressed by a stone that had no device nor initials upon it. He unhesitatingly broke open the packet, took forth the key, and bade Christian uncord the box. This was speedily done, and Mr. Redcliffe then said, "I have before observed to you, Christian, that we are engaged in an enterprise which will not permit us to be over-scrupulous or fastidious in the course we pursue. It is better that we should be guilty of a slight violation of the sanctity of seals and locks than tamely and quietly suffer an amiable and virtuous lady to become the victim of the most nefarious conspiracy."

Having thus spoken, Mr. Redcliffe unlocked the box, and when he raised the lid, the contents were found to consist of beautiful female dresses.

"After all," said Christian, "this box seems to furnish no such clue, sir, as you doubtless expected to discover."

But scarcely were these words spoken, when one of the servants of the house made her appearance, and Mr. Redcliffe at once closed the lid of the box, before she had an opportunity of catching a glimpse of its contents.

"If you please, sir," she said, "a young lady is inquiring for you. She gives the name of Miss Eveleen O'Brien."

"Let her be shown up," responded Mr. Redcliffe, in that curt manner with which he was frequently accustomed to issue his orders; then, the moment the door was closed behind the servant, he said to Christian, "The arrival of this young person is most opportune. I did not expect her until to-morrow, but she doubtless brings us some important intelligence."

The door again opened, and Eveleen made her appearance. She stopped short on finding that Mr. Redcliffe was not alone, but he hastened to take her hand, saying, in a hurried whisper, "Fear not! this youth is in my confidence. You have fulfilled your promise, you have left that den of infamy, and henceforth you shall find a friend in me."

Eveleen murmured her gratitude, and Mr. Redcliffe, making her sit down, said to her, "Now, Miss O'Brien, have the goodness to communicate whatsoever you may have to impart."

"I have succeeded in discovering, sir," responded the young Irish girl, "that for the last six days the establishment has been busy in making up certain elegant dresses which are exact counterparts of others previously made for the Duchess of Marchmont. As much secrecy has been observed as Madame Angelique could possibly maintain in the matter, but as you may suppose, the affair has created no little surprise amongst the girls engaged in the work. It is very certain that the Duchess of Marchmont herself did not order these counterparts, because instructions have been issued to abstain from the slightest allusion thereto in her Grace's presence the next time her Grace visits the establishment."

"And do you happen to have seen these dresses?" inquired Mr. Redcliffe.

"Oh, yes," responded Eveleen, "for inasmuch as the hands were so busy, I volunteered to render Madame Angelique a little assistance, and it was by these means that I got amongst the workwomen and discovered what I have told you."

"There is the box, Miss O'Brien," said Mr. Redcliffe; "have the kindness to examine its contents."

Eveleen did as she was desired, and at once pronounced the dresses to be precisely the same as those which she had seen making up as the duplicates of the costumes originally fashioned to the order of the Duchess of Marchmont.

Christian was bewildered by all that he thus heard, but Mr. Redcliffe threw upon him a significant look, as much as to imply that he was not altogether so much at a loss to fathom the mystery; then again turning to Miss O'Brien, he said, "One of your companions — Lettice Rodney, I think her name is — has either left you, or is going to leave?"

"She has already left, sir," answered Eveleen; "she went away the first thing this morning. She did not say whither she was going, nor how long she should be absent."

"I know whither she is going," responded Mr. Redcliffe. "Now, Christian, you must take your departure, but before you go I have a few words to say to you." Then drawing the youth aside, he whisperingly went on to observe, "To-morrow morning you leave for Oaklands. I also shall repair into that neighbourhood in the course of to-morrow. At a distance of about two miles thence, on the Winchester road, there is a turnpike. If you can possibly manage to meet me there on Saturday next, at three o'clock in the afternoon, I shall be glad to see you. But if not, then for each successive day, at the same hour, shall I be sauntering on the spot, until you make your appearance. Take care and use all possible circumspection; watch well the proceedings of the duke, but beware how you excite suspicion."

Having given these instructions, Mr. Redcliffe directed Christian to cord up the box again, while he himself resealed the packet containing the key, impressing it with a blank stamp which he had in his possession. Our young hero then took his departure, bearing the box with him to Marchmont House in Belgrave Square.

When he was gone, Mr. Redcliffe bade Eveleen excuse him for a few minutes, and he descended to Mrs. Macaulay's parlour. It was now about half-past nine o'clock, and the worthy woman was quietly and comfortably supping off the remainder of a pigeon pie which had been served up at Mr. Redcliffe's dinner-table. She was therefore for a moment discomfited when that gentleman, having knocked at her door, immediately entered before she had even time to say "Come in."

But Mrs. Macaulay was by no means the woman to be long thrown off her guard, and rising from her seat, she put on her very best smiles, cast a glance at the mirror to assure herself that her cap with pink ribbons sat properly on her head, and exclaimed, "Well, Mr. Redcliffe, this is an honour. It's the first time that you have entered my parlour since the day you took my lodgings. But pray sit down, sir. You see I am just picking a little bit. The fact is, my dear sir, I had two pigeon pies made, — one for you, and one for myself — "

"And I wish you a very excellent appetite, my dear madam," said Mr. Redcliffe, as he took a chair.

Here were both joy and surprise for Mrs. Macaulay. He either believed her tale of the duplicate pies, or else, with the kindest consideration, he affected to believe it, and whichever were the case, it was all the same to the worthy woman. And then, too, he had addressed her so familiarly, — "My dear madam!" It was the first time he had ever thus spoken to her; the first time he had ever used the word "dear" epithetically in respect to herself. A suspicion flashed to Mrs. Macaulay's mind. Could he possibly mean matrimony? Had the cap and pink ribbons which became her so well achieved a conquest? Well, certainly she was very lonely, and Mr. Redcliffe was enormously rich; he also was lonely, and what could be more natural than that he should make her an offer? What more natural than that she should accept it?

All these ideas crowded one upon another through the ingenious brain of Mrs. Macaulay; she smiled and simpered, rose from her seat, produced a bottle of wine (that at one and three from the oilman's in the next street), and was even about to invite Mr. Redcliffe to sup off his own pie, when he waved his hand in deprecation of these preparatives, and proceeded to explain himself.

"The fact is, my dear madam," he said, choosing to be civil in order to conciliate her, as it was rather a delicate boon he was about to supplicate at her hands, "you can render me a service."

Here Mrs. Macaulay's countenance suddenly became grave, as the hope of matrimony vanished from her mind in an instant.

"But a service, be it understood," proceeded Mr. Redcliffe, "for which I am prepared to pay liberally."

Here Mrs. Macaulay's countenance suddenly brightened up again, for the idea of payment was always a welcome one, and the assurance of liberality in making it was at all events to a certain degree a salve for the feelings that had just been wounded by disappointment.

"I am sure," she said, "that any service I could render Mr. Redcliffe shall be cheerfully performed, and I know very well, my dear sir, that you are generous in your recompenses."

"A few words will suffice for explanation," said Mr. Redcliffe. "Accident has enabled me to rescue a young woman from a position into which villainy inveigled her. She is genteel and well educated, and I am in hopes of being shortly enabled to restore her to the bosom of her family. But in the meantime I have business of my own to attend to, and which will to-morrow take me out of town, for I know not exactly how long. Now, I must provide Miss O'Brien — for that is her name — with a home."

"And I am sure, sir," Mrs. Macaulay hastened to exclaim, "she can have a comfortable home here. I will be like a mother to her, — anything for your sake, and to give you pleasure."

"Very good, Mrs. Macaulay," observed Redcliffe; "then the matter is settled. Trust to my liberality for your recompense. Watch over this young woman, let her go out as little as possible, and never alone. If her abode be discovered, attempts may be made to inveigle her away, or perhaps to carry her off by force. If when I return I find that she has gone, I shall ascribe all the fault to you, but if she be still with you, your reward shall be munificent. You understand me? Perhaps I ought to add, for your own satisfaction, that this young woman is nothing more to me than an object of sympathy and of Christian charity."

"Oh, dear me, sir," cried Mrs. Macaulay, "it is by no means necessary for you to give me such an assurance! Your character is quite sufficient as a guarantee in that respect. Let the dear creature be introduced to me, and I will treat her with the utmost kindness."

"She will want clothes and pocket-money," continued Mr. Redcliffe, "for inasmuch as she has fled from the place where she has been living, she has brought nothing with her. See that all her wants be attended to."

Thus speaking, Mr. Redcliffe flung some bank-notes upon the table, and hastening up-stairs, speedily reappeared with Eveleen, whom he presented to Mrs. Macaulay.

Meanwhile Christian Ashton had returned to Marchmont House, and according to the instructions he had received from his ducal employer, he labelled the box in his own name. His preparations for departure in the morning being made, he soon retired to rest. The image of the beautiful Miss Vincent continued uppermost in his mind, as indeed it had done ever since he heheld her a few nights previously. Three whole days had now elapsed since then, and he had longed to call at Mr. Chubb's on some pretext in order to see her again, but he had not dared to do so, inasmuch as a fitting excuse was wanting. The fact is, Christian was in love with the charming Miss Vincent, though he did not comprehend the state of his own feelings, nor for a moment suspect the real truth.

The morning dawned upon a night of dreams, in which the image of that fair girl was ever prominent, and having received a supply of money from Mr. Calvert, the duke's steward, Christian took his departure by the coach for Oaklands, the deal box being amongst his own luggage. It was about two in the afternoon that the coach set him down at the porter's lodge at the entrance of the long sweep of avenue which led through the spacious park. The trees in this January season were denuded of their leaves, but nevertheless, to one who had just arrived from that brick and mortar wilderness which constitutes London, the aspect of the spacious domain, with the antique-looking mansion on an eminence in the centre, was cheerful and refreshing. The porter's son — a stalwart lad of about eighteen — shouldered Christian's luggage, and led the way up to the mansion, where our young hero was at once installed in the chamber which he was to occupy. Here, as at Marchmont House, he was to take his meals in the steward's room, and thus there was to be no change in the actual comforts of his position in the duke's employment.

Having notified his arrival to the Duke of Marchmont, he was sent for in the course of the afternoon into his Grace's presence, and was immediately questioned in respect to the box. He replied that he had brought it with him, and handed the duke the little packet containing the key.

" You have faithfully executed my instructions," said his Grace, " and I am well pleased with you. No questions were asked in London about the box, — I mean by the servants at Marchmont House? "

" None, my lord," replied Christian.

" Good," said the duke. " Keep the box for a day or two in your room, and I will then let you know how to dispose of it. Ah! by the bye, Christian, your time will be pretty much your own at Oaklands, for as I have come hither to enjoy myself, I do not mean to be troubled more than I can help with correspondence and so forth."

Christian bowed and withdrew. He presently learned that the Honourable Mr. Stanhope was at Oaklands, but that there were no other guests. He also learned, in a casual manner from the steward, that it was very seldom the Duke of Marchmont paid Oaklands a visit, — his Grace generally giving the preference to country-seats which he possessed in other counties.

" But this," said Mr. Purvis, the steward, " is scarcely to be wondered at, when we consider the painful impression which the tragedy that took place here seventeen or eighteen years ago was but too well calculated to make upon his Grace's mind, — an impression which could scarcely wear off altogether, even at this distance of time. You see, Mr.

Ashton," continued the steward, who was an old man and disposed to be garrulous, "it was not altogether so much the late duke's death — he was murdered, you know, poor man! — that so cruelly afflicted his present Grace, but it was the circumstance that this murder was perpetrated by his Grace's own brother."

"I have read the sorrowful account," said Christian, "and it much shocked me. Have any tidings ever been received of Mr. Bertram Vivian, who committed the murder?"

"None," answered old Purvis. "Of course Mr. Bertram went off at once with the duchess, — I dare say to America, where he had been before, and it is to be supposed they took another name, and did all they could to conceal themselves."

"Were you here at the time of the tragedy?" inquired Christian.

"Yes, I was indeed," responded the old man, shaking his head mournfully. "I was butler then, and it was me and our late duke's own valet — Leachley by name — who discovered the body of our poor master. One of these days I will take and show you the spot. Ah! Mr. Ashton, it was a shocking thing, — a very shocking thing. Of all the servants who were here at the time, I am the only one that now remains. The others have got scattered abroad in one way or another; some risen in the world, some married, — in short, I don't know how it has been, but I am the only one left. Ah! talking of Leachley, the late duke's valet, he married a farmer's daughter about a dozen miles from here, and when the old man died, he took the farm. He has got on well. I see him sometimes; he rides over to the old place to pay me a visit. It's dull enough, I can assure you, accustomed as I was, for so long a period of my life, to have the family here for at least half of every year, and such gaieties and festivities."

"And was the Duchess Eliza very beautiful?" inquired Christian.

"Beautiful?" said the old man; "it is scarcely the word. She was the loveliest creature I ever set eyes upon. But ah! how wicked of her to lose herself with Mr. Bertram, though it did appear they had loved each other before her marriage with the duke. These are sad topics to converse upon, and yet I don't know how it is, Mr. Ashton, but the saddest topics are sometimes those which one likes to talk of most. Ah, by the bye, I forgot to tell you — speaking of the servants who were here at the time — that there was one young woman, her name was Jane, she was her Grace's principal lady's-maid, she loved her Grace dearly, and when it all took place, the poor creature showed signs of going mad. She did go mad, too, a short time after the inquest, and was sent home to her friends. I never heard what became of her, but I should have liked to know, poor thing."

Again the old butler paused and shook his head gloomily.

"But was it quite certain, after all," inquired Christian, "that the Duchess Eliza was guilty in respect to Mr. Bertram Vivian? For I remember to have read in the account which accidentally fell into my hands a little while back — "

"Ah! I think I know to what you allude, Mr. Ashton," interrupted the old steward. "Yes, the late duke did proclaim his wife's innocence, did declare that he had wronged her, and he dispersed us all about in search of her when she fled from the house. For the moment we rejoiced at the idea of her Grace's innocence, for she was beloved by us all. But then came the murder, and who could have murdered the duke but Bertram Vivian? And why should he have murdered him, if not to possess himself of his wife? And why should both have disappeared and never since have been heard of? Is it not clear that they fled together? And if that was the case, must they not have been previously too intimate? Besides, it appeared in the newspapers that the duke said he had wronged his wife, and she must have seen it, and if she was innocent would she not have come forward? "

"True," said Christian, with mournfulness of tone and look, for in the natural magnanimity of his character and in the chivalric generosity of his disposition, he would much rather have believed that the beautiful Duchess Eliza, to whose name so sad a romantic interest attached itself, was really innocent.

"Yes, yes; she was guilty," proceeded the old steward; "there can be no doubt about it. I don't know what it was that made the poor duke suddenly think otherwise, but I do know that the present duke behaved most admirably in the matter, and did all he could to soften down his uncle's feelings and effect a reconciliation. Ah! you should have seen his Grace — I mean the present duke — when he gave his evidence at the inquest, — how he was overcome by his feelings, for he loved his brother Bertram dearly. Ah! when I think of it, it brings tears into my eyes. But the evidence was too convincing. The dog, you know, had torn off a piece of the murderer's coat, which was proved to have been that of Mr. Bertram. And then, too, there was the dagger — It is still here at Oaklands, Mr. Ashton," added the steward, in a low voice, " and one of these days I will show it to you."

When Christian was again alone, he thought to himself what a pity it was that the Duke of Marchmont should have become so changed from the admirable character he appeared to have been at the time of the tragedy. Then, as all accounts concurred in representing, he exhibited the most generous feelings and the most magnanimous disposition, but now how different was he, — darkly and treacherously compassing the ruin of the beautiful and virtuous woman whom he had sworn at the altar to love, cherish, and protect! Christian was shocked when he reflected on the contrast between the man of the time of the tragedy, and the man of the present day.

On the following morning Purvis, the steward, accompanied Christian in a ramble through the grounds. The old man had never been married, and had no relations on the face of the earth, — at least not to his knowledge. He possessed a kindly disposition, and easily attached himself to any one whom he had reason to esteem. He had already taken a fancy to Christian, was pleased with the youth's manners, and gratified by the attention with which his garrulity was listened to. Leaning on our young hero's arm, he walked with him through the grounds, pointing out particular spots of interest. He then led him along the road by the side of which the duke's corpse was discovered, and he indicated the very pond on the edge of which the unfortunate nobleman had been thus found, with his face downward, one of his hands in the water, and the dagger sticking in his back. Christian shuddered, and the steward perceived that he thus trembled with horror.

" The country people in these parts," said old Purvis, " will not, if they can avoid it, pass this spot after dusk. They say, Mr. Ashton, that a strange unearthly shape has been seen moving roundabout the pond, and that the low howlings of a dog have been heard. Of course I don't believe it myself; I am not superstitious, and yet if ever the dead did walk, the murder of the poor duke was horrible enough to make his restless spirit return to the scene of so foul an assassination."

The old man and our young hero retraced their way slowly toward the mansion, on approaching which they perceived the Honourable Mr. Stanhope walking with the duchess in the grounds. Christian glanced toward the steward, to see whether the spectacle produced any effect upon him, but Purvis, suspecting no evil, took it quite as a matter of course, and therefore Christian made no remark.

It was about half-past ten in the evening that our hero retired to his chamber somewhat fatigued, as he had rambled about, either with the old steward or else alone, for the greater portion of the day. He was beginning to undress himself, when he heard the door gently open, and the Duke of Marchmont made his appearance.

"Ah! I am just in time," said his Grace, closing the door behind him, "to prevent you from getting to bed. I want you to do me a little service to-night. What it is I will explain presently. In about an hour I will return. Light your fire — I see that it is laid in the grate — and amuse yourself with a book till I come back to you."

Having thus spoken, the Duke of Marchmont retired, and Christian could not help associating the as yet unexplained service with the box containing the counterpart dresses. He lighted the fire. He had now no longer the least inclination for sleep; he was anxious to ascertain the next step that was to be taken in the conspiracy wherein the duke was embarked, but which he himself was secretly studying, in connection with Redcliffe, to frustrate. He took up a volume, and whiled away the time until close upon midnight, when the door again opened and the Duke of Marchmont made his appearance. His Grace was enveloped in a cloak and had his hat on; it was therefore evident he was going out somewhere.

"Now, my young friend," he said, patting Christian familiarly on the back, and speaking to him also in a more familiar manner than he had ever yet adopted toward his young secretary, "you are to do me the service I require.

I see that I can trust you in everything, as indeed I ought to be enabled to do, for a secretary, you know, is always a confidential person, and from whom an employer is not disposed to keep things secret. Besides, you displayed so much discretion in the way you managed the little business I entrusted to you previous to my departure from London that, comparatively trifling though it were, the result has been to win for you my esteem. I think I told you, Christian," continued the Duke of Marchmont, now affecting to speak in a careless, offhand manner, " that the box contains certain little presents which I am anxious to make, and they are for the principal tenants' wives and daughters on my estates. I mean to surprise some of them, so that they sha'n't know from whom the things come, It is a freak of mine, and I have my own way of carrying it out. Do you understand? "

" Yes, my lord," answered Christian, preserving his countenance as changeless as possible. " It is for your Grace to give your orders, and I am ready to obey them."

" You are going a little distance with me," proceeded Marchmont, " and I must trouble you to bring the box along with you. It is not very heavy. Indeed it only contains gown pieces of silk and muslin, a few shawls, caps, and cambric pocket handkerchiefs, and that kind of trifles that Madame Angelique can supply as tastefully as she can richer and costlier things."

Christian knew that Marchmont was giving utterance to as complete a tissue of falsehoods as ever were unblushingly poured forth. He, however, said not a word, but hastily putting on an upper coat and his hat, shouldered the box, having previously torn off the label in compliance with a hint to that effect on the part of his Grace. The duke extinguished the candle that was burning in the room, whence he led the way, and conducted Christian to the private staircase in another part of the spacious building. This they descended; the duke opened the door at the bottom, by means of a key which he had about him, and they issued forth into the grounds.

The night was dark and windy. No moon was visible on the face of heaven, no stars were twinkling, but sombre clouds were flying fast high overhead. The skeleton branches of the trees were dimly perceptible through the obscurity;

the evergreen shrubs, dotting the garden at frequent intervals, looked like human shapes. Through the grounds the duke led the way in silence, Christian carrying the box, and they soon entered upon that very road along which Mr. Purvis, the old steward, had conducted our hero in the morning, and by the side of which was the pond where the fatal tragedy was enacted.

" The night is bitter cold," said the duke, at length breaking silence. " The wind is high, too. You seem to stagger beneath the box? "

" Not at all, my lord," answered Ashton. " But how strangely the wind moans. It really seems as if it were the voice of the dead, or, rather, of the dying."

" Nonsense," ejaculated Marchmont, " the wind is natural enough in its sounds. Never give way to superstitious thoughts."

A silence again ensued, but as they approached the spot where Christian knew the pond was situated, he could not prevent a certain gloomy sensation from creeping over him. It was not that he was naturally superstitious; very far from it, but he had been told by Purvis that the country people of those parts reported strange sights to have been seen and strange noises to have been heard in the neighbourhood of that pond, and that they did not choose to pass it after dusk. But even setting aside these circumstances, Christian knew that a horrible murder had been perpetrated on the brink of that pond, and the consciousness thereof was not calculated to engender very agreeable associations. And now, too, he could not help thinking that it was indelicate to a degree, and indicative of a hardened mind on the part of the Duke of Marchmont, to be threading this very road and passing by that very spot, when evidently engaged in taking some step in the carrying out of a foully designed treachery.

While thus engaged in thought, Christian became aware, by a peculiar turning of the road, that they were now in the close vicinage of the pond, and it was not without a shudder that in a few moments he caught sight of the water which was dimly glimmering in the obscurity of the night. But he said nothing. He felt that if the duke were thus hardened enough to pass the spot when intent on deeds of evil, he himself would not be indelicate enough to make the slightest allusion to a tragedy which ought to be so memorable in the Marchmont family. He perceived, however, that the duke quickened his pace as he passed by the pond, so that Christian had some little difficulty in keeping up with him, the box on his shoulder forming a resistance to the gushing wind which blew right against it. Marchmont, however, soon slackened his pace again, and at a distance of about a hundred yards beyond the scene of the murder, he struck into a by-lane, Christian following him. A short distance down this lane there appeared a tolerably sized farmhouse, with a little garden in front. The duke opened the gate and passed on to the entrance, with Christian close behind. The obscurity was not too great to prevent our hero from perceiving that the place had a sombre and desolate look. There was the farmyard, but quiet as the grave, and yet the gate had swung back with a din which would have aroused the cackling of geese and ducks, or the barking of a dog, if any were there.

The duke knocked at the door; it was presently opened by an old woman with tottering gait, and whose head shook as if she had the palsy. She carried a light in her hand, and evidently recognizing the duke in a moment, said something which Christian did not catch. His Grace answered her quickly, as if by the very rapidity as well as brevity of his utterance enjoining her to silence, and then he bade Christian deposit the box in the passage. This the youth did, and the duke at once hurried him away from the place.

They now retraced their steps down the lane into the road, — our hero wondering the while for what earthly reason the box could have been taken to that lonely destination. The duke said nothing, and they walked on together. Again they were approaching the pond, but when just within sight of it, an ejaculation burst from our young hero's lips, and under the influence of the sudden feeling which thus smote him, he caught the duke forcibly by the arm.

"Look, look, my lord," he said; "that shape."

And sure enough a dark shape was moving in the vicinage of the pond. It was no delusion; it was palpable, — a human form seen through the obscurity, darker than the darkness.

"Ah!" and the duke stopped short.

The next moment the shape thus seen moved away from the pond around the bend of the road, and was absorbed in the obscurity of the night.

" It is nothing," said the duke, but Christian thought that his Grace spoke in a tone which was more or less troubled. " It is some wayfarer. Let us see."

His Grace proceeded onward at a rapid rate, — Christian keeping up with him. Had the traveller — if it were one — been going at anything like a moderate rate, he must have been overtaken, but no one was to be seen.

" I dare say he has cut across the fields," said the Duke of Marchmont, after awhile relaxing his pace again; then, as if stricken by a sudden thought, he demanded of Christian, " Why were you frightened? What made you clutch me as if in such terror? "

" I beg your Grace's pardon," said our young hero; " I know it was a great liberty on my part — "

" No, no, I did not allude to it in that light," said Marchmont; " you of course could not help it; you were smitten with alarm, and that is the truth of it, eh? "

" I confess that it was so, my lord," rejoined Christian. " The fact is, I walked this way in the morning, and Mr. Purvis, who was with me, pointed out the spot — "

" Ah! and I dare say," exclaimed the duke, " he told you the old gossips' tales about the place. Deeply as I revere the memory of my deceased uncle, yet I am not given, Christian, to superstitious terrors. It is weak and unmanly to yield to them. I counselled you against such influences as we were coming along the road ere now; remember my advice for the future."

A silence ensued, and in a short time the grounds of the mansion were reached.

" I need not say, my young friend," observed the duke, in a low tone, " that our midnight expedition is to be kept entirely secret. Of course you understand this much. You see that I trust you, and you must in every sense render yourself worthy of my confidence. Ah! by the bye, when I think of it, the maid who does out your room may notice the absence of the box. Should she allude to it in your presence, you can easily devise some excuse, — that you sent it back to London by the coach, or off somewhere by the carrier, for some purpose or another, — anything, in short, that comes into your head. It will be a little falsehood that is venial enough, and will all the more effectually assist the carrying out of my freakish project."

At this moment the door of the secret staircase was reached; the duke opened it by means of the key which he had about him, and wishing Christian "good night," he retired to his own apartment, while our hero sought his chamber to ponder upon all that had occurred, for he certainly felt but little inclination to sleep.

END OF VOLUME XVI.

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